

NEW DIRECTIONS IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

# Spinoza and Education

Freedom, understanding and  
empowerment

Johan Dahlbeck





‘Spinoza argued that the greatest help to one person seeking knowledge is another person with the same aim. Johan Dahlbeck presents an engaging, original account of how we help one another. *Spinoza and Education* is a well-informed, useful introduction to Spinoza and a thoughtful application of Spinoza’s views to pressing issues in the philosophy of education.’

**Michael LeBuffe**, Professor, University of Otago, New Zealand

‘This book contributes to the ongoing reconception of Spinoza as foremost a moral philosophy, while developing an important conversation about Spinoza’s philosophy of education. The book adeptly renders a famously obscure and abstract philosophical system into a comprehensible and practical theory that speaks productively to the real life concerns facing educators and students.’

**Matthew J. Kisner**, author of *Spinoza on Human Freedom: Reason, Autonomy and the Good Life*,  
University of South Carolina, USA

‘Spinoza excites the educational imagination. Johan Dahlbeck’s *Spinoza and Education* amplifies this excitement, engaging with the ‘substance’ of Spinoza’s ethics of self-preservation, and taking care to trace the implications of this ethics for teachers. As such Dahlbeck’s work reveals the Spinozan roots of many contemporary critiques of institutionalised education.’

**Andrew Gibbons**, Associate Professor,  
Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand





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# Spinoza and Education

*Spinoza and Education* offers a comprehensive investigation into the educational implications of Spinoza's moral theory. Taking Spinoza's naturalism as its point of departure, it constructs a considered account of education, taking special care to investigate the educational implications of Spinoza's psychological egoism. What emerges is a counterintuitive form of education grounded in the egoistic striving of the teacher to persevere and to flourish in existence while still catering to the ethical demands of the students and the greater community.

In providing an educational reading of Spinoza's moral theory, this book sets up a critical dialogue between educational theory and recent studies that highlights the centrality of ethics in Spinoza's overall philosophy. By placing his work in a contemporary educational context, chapters explore a counterintuitive conception of education as an ethical project, aimed at overcoming the desire to seek short-term satisfaction and troubling the influential concept of the student as consumer. This book also considers how education, from a Spinozistic point of view, may be approached in terms of a kind of cognitive therapy serving to further a more scientifically adequate understanding of the world and aimed at combating prejudices and superstition.

*Spinoza and Education* demonstrates that Spinoza's moral theory can further an educational ideal where notions of freedom and self-preservation provide the conceptual core of a coherent philosophy of education. As such, it will appeal to researchers, academics, and postgraduate students in the fields of philosophy of education, theory of education, critical thinking, philosophy, ethics, and Spinoza studies.

**Johan Dahlbeck** is senior lecturer in child and youth studies at Malmö University.



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Freedom, understanding and empowerment

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Johan Dahlbeck



First published 2017  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Names: Dahlbeck, Johan.

Title: Spinoza and education : freedom, understanding and empowerment /  
Johan Dahlbeck.

Description: New York : Routledge, 2016. | Includes bibliographical  
references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016027950 | ISBN 9781138931817 (hardcover) |  
ISBN 9781315679495 (electronic)

Subjects: LCSH: Spinoza, Benedictus de, 1632-1677. |  
Education—Philosophy.

Classification: LCC LB475.S7 A2 2016 | DDC 371.001—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016027950>

ISBN: 978-1-138-93181-7 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-67949-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo  
by Apex CoVantage, LLC



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# Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Gert Biesta and Michael A. Peters for their keen support and interest in this book project. I would also like to thank Clare Ashworth for seeing it through the review process. I am deeply indebted to the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and valuable suggestions – suggestions that helped shape the finished book in important ways. I am also grateful to Heidi Lowther and Thomas Storr of Routledge for all their help during the process of finishing this book. I would especially like to recognize the invaluable input of my two critical friends, Peter Lilja and Moa De Lucia Dahlbeck. Without your willingness to read and comment on drafts of this book, it would be in a considerably worse shape than it is. Any remaining errors are, of course, my own.



# Editions used and list of abbreviations

## Primary literature:

John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, trans. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. 2 vols. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984 & 1985).

Edwin Curley, ed. and trans. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. Vol. 1. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985).

Jonathan Israel, trans. *Theological-Political Treatise* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Samuel Shirley, trans. *Spinoza: Complete Works* (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 2002).

The following abbreviations are used for referring to primary literature:

## Abbreviations

C	Curley, ed. and trans., <i>The Collected Works of Spinoza</i> .
CM	Spinoza's <i>Metaphysical Thoughts</i> ( <i>Cogita Metaphysica</i> ). Appendix to his <i>Principles of Cartesian Philosophy</i> ( <i>Renati Descartes Principiorum Philosophiae, Pars I et II, More Geometrico demonstratae</i> ).
CSM	Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch, trans., <i>The Philosophical Writings of Descartes</i> , vols 1 and 2.
I	Israel, ed., <i>Theological-Political Treatise</i> .
KV	Spinoza's <i>Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being</i> ( <i>Korte Verhandeling van God, de Mensch en des zelfs Welstand</i> ).
S	Shirley, trans., <i>Spinoza: Complete Works</i> .
TIE	Spinoza's <i>Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect</i> ( <i>Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione</i> )
TP	Spinoza's <i>Political Treatise</i> ( <i>Tractatus Politicus</i> )
TTP	Spinoza's <i>Theological-Political Treatise</i> ( <i>Tractatus Theologico-Politicus</i> )



The *CM* is cited by part and chapter number. The *KVTP*, and *TTP* are cited by chapter number and sometimes by the section number. The *TIE* is cited by section number. Spinoza's correspondence is cited by letter number and page number from Shirley's *Spinoza: Complete Works*. References to Spinoza's *Ethics* first cite the part, and then use the following abbreviations:

a	axiom
app	appendix
c	corollary
d	demonstration
l	lemma
D	definition
DOE	Definition of the Emotions (end of Part 3)
exp	explanation
p	proposition
post	postulate
pref	preface
s	scholium

Accordingly, 2p13c refers to *Ethics*, Part 2, proposition 13, corollary. Translations of the *Ethics* are taken from Curley's *The Collected Works of Spinoza*.





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# Introduction

## Why all education begins and ends in moral education

In ancient Greece, Socrates and Plato understood and recognized the important connection between knowledge and the good life. It is no exaggeration to say that the relation between knowledge and the good life, in different ways (depending on how one understands both knowledge and the good life), has determined the direction of educational thought ever since. If the forming of reliable knowledge about the world is considered a precondition both for living well and for ensuring successful human coexistence, then it seems that these goals hinge, at least in part, on a good education based on a solid ethical foundation. In this sense, all education begins and ends in moral education. From this perspective, the very reason for striving to understand the world we live in better is so we may live better lives, both individually and collectively. Since conceptions of morality differ widely, however, it should come as no surprise that education comes in many different forms. It follows from this that one of the major challenges of any systematic account of education concerns how, more precisely, one is to conceive of the link between the good life of the individual and the establishing and sustaining of a flourishing community. This challenge has motivated radically different accounts of how to best conceive of the relationship between the teacher and the student and between the education of the individual and the shaping of society at large. It has also given rise to different views on how to best understand the relation between the acquisition of knowledge and our ability to live fulfilling lives in accordance with this knowledge.

This book takes as its point of departure the need to revisit these eternal questions in a time where the whys and hows of education are as fiercely debated as ever before. Far-reaching societal changes in late modernity have radically altered the preconditions of and demands on education. The age-old question of how and why young people need to be educated have resurged, triggered by major changes in the social and technological landscape. In the face of these shifts and changes, the teacher is once again called upon to help ensure the safe passage from ignorance to enlightenment even while these concepts are being renegotiated and redefined. The greatest threats to education today appear to range from the tension between an increasingly consumer-oriented society and the task of education to educate beyond the immediate needs of the job market



to the lack of a common ethical compass with which to navigate in an at once globalized and fragmented world.

It goes without saying that to defeat these threats is a task far too daunting and complex for any single book. Accordingly, it is not the purpose of this book to provide a satisfying answer to the question of how and why young people need to be educated today. Instead, it is the purpose of this book to, with the help of seventeenth-century philosopher Spinoza (1632–1677), suggest some constructive ways of returning to the question of why education first and foremost ought to be approached in terms of an ethical enterprise and how this understanding can help us enforce the sometimes-weak link between the education of the individual and the forming of a flourishing society.

The first chapter of the book serves to introduce the reader to Spinoza's philosophy, outlining his general metaphysical account, his account of human nature and his moral theory, all of which compose a tightly built and unified system. Spinoza's metaphysics is compared with that of Descartes, the reason for this being that Spinoza's account in many ways is formulated as a radical development of Descartes' core metaphysical assumptions. The purpose of outlining Spinoza's metaphysics is to establish the central place of his moral theory within his overall philosophy. Spinoza's moral theory is then taken as a point of departure for a Spinozistic account of education, introduced in Chapter One and developed throughout the rest of the book. Chapter Two establishes that a Spinozistic understanding of education entails that to be educated is to exist more. What it means to exist more and how this correlates with the improvement of the understanding are key questions addressed in this chapter. Another important purpose is to establish the strong link between gaining a better understanding of the world and becoming ethical. This, in turn, serves to reaffirm that all education, from a Spinozistic point of view, may be understood in terms of moral education.

Chapter Three aims to draw out the educational consequences of Spinoza's moral theory, labeled his ethics of self-preservation. One challenge arising out of this concerns the problem of how to construe a convincing theory of education based on Spinoza's psychological egoism. It is argued that this can be done once we see that the self-preservation of the individual is inescapably bound up with the self-preservation of the greater community, both of which are similarly constituted bodies of varying complexity according to Spinoza. It is argued that not only can education be conceived in terms of a self-empowering project for the teacher but that this understanding may indeed open up for a powerful critique of the commonsensical notion of the teacher as a self-sacrificing altruist and of education as a self-evidently student-centered enterprise. Another related problem addressed in this chapter concerns Spinoza's denial of moral responsibility and how this can be reconciled with a credible account of education. The chapter closes by considering how a Spinozistic account of education compares with accounts drawing from other influential ethical theories.

Chapter Four tackles a potential problem that arises from Spinoza's epistemology insofar as human passivity appears to be at odds with the ethical



and epistemological ideal of attaining an adequate understanding of the world. Since humans are always passive to some extent, it is necessary to address this problem so as not to end up with an idealized conception of education that turns out to be impossible to live up to. In fact, it is argued that passivity is not only unavoidable but that it actually plays a productive role insofar as education presupposes lived experience to the extent that we gain knowledge about ourselves and the world through our bodies. It is concluded that good education pays close attention to embodied experiences in aiming at perfecting the art of making intelligent choices relative to the actual living conditions of the teacher and the students.

Chapter Five returns to the central issue of positing education as a collective striving, where the ethical striving of the teacher is intimately linked with (and conditioned by) the ethical striving of the students. This discussion draws on Spinoza's doctrine of the imitation of affects, stating that our desires are always influenced by the striving of others. In order to distinguish the role of the teacher from the role of the students, the role of the teacher as a moral exemplar for the students to emulate is discussed in some detail. This discussion is then related to Michael LeBuffe's notion of the optimistic nutritionist, in an endeavor to provide another perspective on education as the promotion of mental health and the combating of mental illness.

In Chapter Six I offer an account of education paralleling Spinoza's theory of the state. It is argued that this is helpful for gaining a better idea of the role of the teacher vis-à-vis the role of the student and for addressing the issue of authority in education. It is concluded that the Spinozistic teacher acts as a kind of therapist balancing the amount of resistance offered to the students. Moreover, it is argued that this poses a serious challenge to the popular notion of the student as consumer, where the consumer-oriented view on education is taken to lead to bondage rather than freedom. In the closing chapter I summarize the core arguments of the book, and in so doing I set out to outline a coherent Spinozistic conception of education in terms of an education founded on the teacher's and the student's rational striving to persevere in existence and geared to the construction of a rational society. Part of this involves revisiting some of the most enduring educational debates in order to see how a Spinozistic account of education can help offer new perspectives on questions like the problem of free will, the problem of the student as consumer (and the conflation of wants and needs), the problem of the status of moral knowledge, and the problem of indoctrination.



# 1 Spinoza's ethical project

This chapter introduces the reader to Spinoza's metaphysical system, which is firmly grounded in his substance monism. This is done in relation to Cartesian metaphysics as Spinoza's philosophy engages in a critical dialogue with Descartes. Having done so, it goes on to summarize Spinoza's anti-humanist account of human nature and the moral theory that flows from this. It then sets the stage for the coming discussion on education and Spinoza's ethics of self-preservation, drawing on some recent work highlighting the central place of ethics within Spinoza's overall philosophy. The chapter closes by introducing the mental health perspective on education, arguing that the educational implications of Spinoza's philosophy suggests that education concerns the promotion of mental health and the combating of mental illness.

## **The metaphysical building blocks of Descartes and Spinoza: Similarities and differences**

This book is not a study in metaphysics but is rather conceived as an investigation into the educational implications of Spinoza's ethics of self-preservation. Even so, in order to show the radical implications of Spinoza's moral theory, it needs to be situated against the background of his metaphysics. This, in turn, benefits from being presented in relation to the metaphysics of Descartes, who, as Edwin Curley (1988) argues, acts as an important counterpart to Spinoza.<sup>1</sup> Since Cartesian dualism has become engrained in a more or less commonsensical understanding of human subjectivity and since Spinoza, arguably, has formulated the most radical and metaphysically robust alternative to Cartesian dualism,<sup>2</sup> this also serves to highlight some of the more counterintuitive aspects of Spinoza's philosophy.

Both Descartes and Spinoza subscribe to a general notion of philosophy as “a deductive system which begins with metaphysics and ends in moral philosophy, after having considered the nature of man” (Curley 1988: 6). Understanding the educational implications of Spinoza's moral philosophy (which would make for the normative claims informing a philosophy of education) would therefore seem to require an at least rudimentary understanding of his metaphysics and his corresponding account of human nature. This order of things corresponds



with Spinoza's general understanding of epistemology. For Spinoza, the understanding of an effect (in this case the ethical consequences of understanding the world in a particular way) always relies on, and involves, the understanding of its cause (in this case the particular metaphysical structure that is acting as a foundation for the moral theory in question) (1a4). Accordingly, Yitzhak Melamed concludes that from a Spinozistic point of view "we *must* begin with the knowledge of the infinite, the cause of all things, before turning to the knowledge of finite things. Without knowing the infinite, we cannot gain any knowledge of finite things" (2013a: xvii).

In this chapter I will outline Spinoza's metaphysical account parallel to its Cartesian counterpart by concentrating on identifying key similarities and differences in the understanding of the central "building blocks"<sup>3</sup> of their respective account. For Descartes as well as for Spinoza, there are three basic building blocks making up the foundation of a principally mechanistic universe. These are substance, attribute and mode. In order to grasp the similarities and differences of their respective metaphysical account, it is necessary to get a better understanding of how each of the philosophers understands these fundamental concepts. Having done so, we will then make use of this background to unpack some additional metaphysical notions useful for situating Spinoza's anti-humanist conception of human nature and his subsequent moral theory. These include Spinoza's understanding of power, his understanding of the essence of finite modes as the striving to persevere in being, his gradualist understanding of reality, and his corresponding account of perfection and self-determination.

On a basic level, we may start by asserting that one way of explaining nature is to investigate chains of causation. Both Descartes and Spinoza<sup>4</sup> ground their metaphysics in the claim that everything has a cause. Following this assumption is a second assumption stating that something is therefore *either* a cause *or* an effect.<sup>5</sup> This, then, results in a foundational division between things that cause themselves and things that are caused externally.<sup>6</sup> Things that cause themselves are called substances and refer to the most basic objects in the world. Everything else is caused by substances, either directly or by way of other intermediary causes.

In his *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes defines a substance as follows: "By *substance* we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence" (*Principles* I, 51/CSM vol. 1: 210). Immediately after giving this definition, however, Descartes qualifies it by adding that even though there really is only one thing which can be said to exist independently in this strict sense, namely the infinite and perfect substance of God, there are a host of other finite substances that can be said to "exist only with the help of God's concurrence" (*Principles* I, 51/CSM vol. 1: 210). Hence, for Descartes, the world contains many different substances that are divided into two basic kinds, those that are material (i.e., physical bodies extended in space) and those that are immaterial (i.e., minds that are expressed through thought).<sup>7</sup> Of the immaterial substances, there is only one which is absolutely infinite and unlimited, and that is God.<sup>8</sup> All other minds are limited and depend on God for their existence. This helps explain why thought is considered superior to



extension for Descartes. Consequently, Descartes allows for finite substances in addition to the infinite substance of God; that is he allows for substances that can be conceived of independently but that are still caused to exist and sustained by God (*Principles* I, 51/CSM vol. 1: 52). As noted above, the human mind and the human body are two such finite substances. This is so since the body and the mind can be conceived to exist independently of one another. As one substance expresses itself through extension and the other through thought and since extension and thought are not causally or conceptually dependent upon one another, Descartes considers them to be substantially different.

Spinoza offers a seemingly similar definition of substance. He writes: “By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed” (1D3). Spinoza, however, adheres much more strictly to the definition of substance as a *self-caused* and *self-sustained* thing and accordingly the only thing that can qualify as a true substance is the infinite substance of God (1p14), which for Spinoza is identical with Nature. The fact that substance is *self-explained* goes to highlight the thoroughgoing rationalism of his metaphysics. For Spinoza, to exist is to be explainable,<sup>9</sup> either through itself or through another (1a2). Since no other thing can be understood to be self-caused or can be explained without referring to the concept of another, Spinoza will not include finite things in his definition of substance. This, then, amounts to a major difference between Descartes’ and Spinoza’s understanding of substance. It is a difference that will come to shape their respective metaphysical account and that, as we shall see, will result in some key differences in their accounts of human nature.

As already implied, Descartes ascribes fundamental properties (e.g., thought and extension) to the substances – properties without which the substances cannot be said to exist or be conceived. These essential properties he labels attributes. Accordingly, he establishes that “each substance has one principle property which constitutes its nature and essence, and to which all its other properties are referred” and that “in the case of mind, this is thought, and in the case of body it is extension” (*Principles* I, 53/CSM vol. 1: 210). One way of explaining this is to say that although a body can take many different shapes (as is evident in our everyday experience of the material world), it is essential for the substance of body to be extended in three-dimensional space. Similarly, the substance of mind can (and evidently does) contain many different thoughts, but it is nevertheless essential that it is expressed through the attribute of thought. These attributes are essential in the sense that a body would cease being a body were it not extended in space and a mind would cease being a mind if it did not think. Accordingly, every other thing we can say about a body or a mind is dependent upon the essential attributes of extension and thought.

Again, Spinoza’s definition of attribute is deceptively similar to Descartes’. He defines it as follows: “By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of substance, as constituting its essence” (1D4). Since Spinoza only allows for one single substance, however, he obviously cannot ascribe different essential features to different substances. Instead he understands an attribute as being



a way through which substance is expressing itself and through which it is grasped by the intellect. When substance is expressing itself through the attribute of extension, we perceive a body, and when substance is expressing itself through the attribute of thought, we perceive a mind. These are still expressions of one and the same substance. It follows from this that substance is “consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence” (1D6). The reason a human being can only perceive the attributes of extension and thought is simply because a human being consists of a mind and a body (2p13c) and can therefore only perceive the world either in terms of extension or thought (2a5). Since extension and thought are attributes of the same substance, Spinoza holds that they mirror each other (i.e., that they run parallel with one another) (2p7s) and furthermore, that there is no causal connection between the two. That is, everything expressed through thought is simultaneously expressed through extension and vice versa. Extension and thought may be understood in terms of different ways of grasping the same substance. They may be thought of as “two separate explanatory tracks,” one “for the explanation of things conceived as extended” and one “for the explanation of things conceived as thinking” (Della Rocca 2012: 13). This amounts to Spinoza’s famous parallelism doctrine, and besides positing that everything that exists is expressed through parallel attributes, it also has the radical consequence of suggesting that for every individual body, there is always a corresponding mind. That is, even things that we normally understand to be inanimate and nonsentient, such as stones, for instance, have minds. There is, however, a difference between the mind of a stone and the mind of a human being, but we will return to this later when we discuss Spinoza’s account of human nature.

Thus far we have covered the most basic object in the world, substance, and the form that substance expresses itself through, attribute (according to both Descartes and Spinoza). What remains then is to explain the world of particular things (i.e., all of the individual bodies and all of the individual thoughts). This is where Spinoza’s metaphysical account departs in a more immediately noticeable sense from Descartes’. Their understandings of a mode differ radically. This is quite natural, however, given the differences in their understandings of the concepts of substance and attribute.

For Descartes, even though substances may be conceived as finite and as caused by God, they are still, as noted above, conceptually independent in the sense that a body can be conceived without a mind and vice versa. However, not everything about a body or a mind is independent in this sense. As soon as we conceive of a particular body or mind, we need to take account of things like the particular size and shape of the body in question and the particular thoughts being thought by the mind in question. These are the modes that depend on the substances insofar as they are nonessential. That is, the particular size of a given body is not an essential feature of it. If the size of a particular body changes, this body will not cease being the body that it is. Likewise, particular thoughts are not essential features of a mind since a mind can be conceived without thinking a particular thought. Accordingly, Descartes explains



that “[w]e employ the term *mode* when we are thinking of a substance as being affected or modified” (*Principles* I, 56/CSM vol. 1: 211).

Since finite bodies and minds do not count as substances for Spinoza, he understands them (and not just their particular features) as modes. Much like for Descartes, a mode is a modification of substance, but since there is only one substance for Spinoza, all things in nature are modifications of the same substance. The only difference between individual modes is the degree of power by which they are being expressed. Modes are, quite simply, all the different (extended and thinking) things being expressed by substance (God or Nature). All bodies and all minds are modes insofar as they are causally and conceptually dependent on substance. Hence, Spinoza defines a mode as follows: “By mode I understand the affections of a substance, *or* that which is in another through which it is also conceived” (1D5). As Michael Della Rocca notes: “A mode is thus conceptually dependent on something other than the mode itself, and this is why a mode is a mode and not a substance” (2008: 46).

Against the background of this brief sketch of Descartes’ and Spinoza’s metaphysical building blocks, we can begin to make out one of the major differences between the two philosophers – a difference that spills over onto and shapes their accounts of human nature. Whereas Descartes’ conception of finite substances allows for a clear-cut distinction between the human mind and the rest of the natural world, Spinoza’s understanding of human beings as finite modes clearly does not – at least not in the same sense. For Descartes, the human mind, being substantially different from extended bodies, functions as a means by which to secure a metaphysical gulf between humanity and the rest of nature. It brings humans one step closer to the eternal mind of God if you will, granting humans a privileged perspective vis-à-vis the rest of nature by virtue of being thinking things. The notion that the mind can, at least logically, exist independently of the body also means that Descartes – although he is a rationalist – can still sustain the notion of the immortality of the human soul.

For Spinoza, however, there is no substantial difference between a human being and other finite modes. All things are modes of the same substance. The human mind does not amount to a unified or simple thinking subject, but is, in Melamed’s words, “a mere functionally unified collection of ideas” (2011: 15). This is usually referred to as Spinoza’s naturalism, stating that everything in nature is governed by the same set of principles – no exceptions (3pref). It corresponds well with his mechanistic understanding of the universe where the only self-caused thing is God or Nature and where everything else is therefore caused by something else. It also means that all finite modes are determined by their place in the causal (or explanatory) network of which they are a part (1p28), which goes to illustrate that besides subscribing to a naturalistic understanding of the world, Spinoza is also a determinist. According to Spinoza’s parallelism, this order of things is the same whether we consider bodies or thoughts. As John Carriero notes:

There is no room in his [Spinoza’s] universe for a physical structure that operates independently of the rest of the universe. And, if there is no room



for a physical structure that operates independently of the rest of the universe, there is no room for a psychological structure that operates in an absolute manner either.

(2014: 30)

Whereas Descartes can distinguish between humans and other things in nature by way of the attribute of thought, Spinoza's parallelism precludes this kind of categorical distinction. At the same time, Descartes' categorical distinction poses a metaphysical problem for him insofar as it becomes difficult to explain body-mind causation, which he allows for, if body and mind really make for separate substances where one is conceptually independent from the other. Spinoza avoids the difficulty of having to explain body-mind causation by denying any kind of causal relation between body and mind. Body and mind are simply parallel to one another, and in this sense Spinoza subscribes to what is commonly referred to as panpsychism.<sup>10</sup> Spinoza's panpsychism thereby introduces a radical break with Descartes as it maintains that every extended thing is, to some degree, a thinking thing because it has a corresponding idea. Humans are singled out, not because they are substantially different from other things (by virtue of being thinking things) but because their complex bodies are paralleled by more complex minds. A body for Spinoza is simply a collection of extended parts (or simpler bodies) that sustain a stable relation of motion and rest among one another. In this sense it mirrors the mind, which, again, is nothing above or beyond a collection of thinking parts (ideas) interacting so as to form a more complex idea. A body, then, can be anything from simple extended parts to extremely complex individuals made up of a great many parts sustaining a ratio of motion and rest. As Della Rocca explains, a complex body (qua individual) is such that its many parts are "responsive to one another in [a] systematic way" (1996a: 207). A human body, then, is one such example of a very complex body that is mirrored by a very complex idea, the human mind.

It remains to be seen, then, how Spinoza can conceive of human nature as being distinct from other expressions of life, and in extension, how he can construct a functional moral theory, addressing humans specifically without at the same time assuming the Cartesian metaphysical divide between humanity and the rest of nature. In order to address this crucial question, we will need to establish some additional metaphysical concepts useful for framing Spinoza's anti-humanist account of the human being.

### **Degrees of reality: On self-determination, power and perfection**

We might begin to close in on the question of what constitutes human nature by approaching it from the perspective of the nature of finite modes in general. Following Spinoza's rationalism, we have seen that if we want to understand the nature of finite things (being effects of something else), it helps to understand more about their cause. Their cause, of course, is God or Nature. In Part



One of the *Ethics* Spinoza claims that “God’s power is his essence itself” (1p34). Because God or Nature is the sole cause of itself and of everything that is (via intermediary modes), it follows that “whatever exists expresses in a certain and determinate way the power of God” (1p36d). This power is conceived as the essence of God or Nature. Without this power we cannot conceive of God or Nature since the essence of a thing is that which is necessary for conceiving it (2D2). From this it follows that the certain and determinate expression of this power makes for the essence of finite singular things. In general, then, all finite modes are essentially expressions of the power of God or Nature, but depending on the complexity of the particular body/mind-parcel, individuals may be differentiated from one another.

For Spinoza, the underlying principle behind every individual expression of life is that life inevitably strives for more life. This striving should not be understood in terms of a free will intervening with the common order of the world but in terms of a natural tendency that is perfectly compatible with – and follows from – the governing laws of nature.<sup>11</sup> As Della Rocca notes: “what a thing strives to do is what its current state will lead to do *unless it is prevented by external causes*” (2008: 147, my emphasis). Accordingly, the nature of finite modes is understood to be this striving, or natural tendency, for sustaining and increasing life. This, in effect, is Spinoza’s famous *conatus* principle – dictating that the nature of all finite things is the striving to persevere in being (3p7) – and this principle makes power a central concept for Spinoza’s metaphysics. Life, for Spinoza, is an expression of power. And as we have seen above, finite things differ only in the intensity of power with which they are being expressed by the substance of God or Nature. This expression of power is not understood to be a temporal act, however, as the infinite substance of God or Nature is not conceived as an intervening force acting on the world from outside as a final cause. Rather, substance is understood as a continuous expression of power of an immanent cause<sup>12</sup> (remember that for Spinoza God or Nature is the only self-causing thing; everything else is in God or Nature).

As we will come to see shortly, power turns out to play a central role in Spinoza’s ethical theory as well, where virtue is in fact equated with power. In 4D8 Spinoza writes: “By virtue and power I understand the same thing, that is (by 3p7), virtue, insofar as it is related to man, is the very essence, or nature, of man, insofar as he has the power of bringing about certain things, which can be understood through the laws of his nature alone.”

At the level of substance (nature qua *Natura naturans*), then, the flow of power is constant, but at the level of finite modes – the modifications of substance (nature qua *Natura naturata*) – it is fluctuating and constantly being redistributed among the modes. The *conatus* principle entails that all finite modes strive to increase their power to exist and in doing so to secure a greater part of the overall power of substance. Finite modes do this at the expense of one another and so this “innate principle of activity” (Nadler 2014: 43n) at once motivates them to preserve and perfect themselves as far as they can and pit them against one another in the ongoing struggle for more power. Since a thing’s *conatus* is



conceived as its actual essence, it follows that “no thing has anything in itself by which it can be destroyed, or which takes its existence away” and that consequently “it is opposed to everything which can take its existence away” (3p6d). Hence, all things essentially strive to persevere in existence at the same time, but since different things do this with different degrees of power, weaker forces are either diminished or destroyed when overtaken by stronger forces.

This, for Spinoza, is the one thing that constitutes what we, as humans, essentially are. The same, of course, goes for any other finite mode, albeit to a different degree (depending, as we have just seen, on the relative complexity of the body/mind mode in question). It also, as Don Garrett notes, “provides his theory of human and animal psychology with a unified source of motivational power” (2002: 127). Accordingly, as Steven Nadler points out, the *conatus* principle “explains a good many of the dynamic features of the world,” insofar as it “accounts for why stones are hard to break, why a body at rest or in motion will remain at rest or in motion unless it encounters an outside force, why the human body fights disease, and why we desire many of the things we do” (2014: 43). As we will see later, this natural striving is also what “provides his ethical theory with a fundamental category of moral assessment” (Garrett 2002: 127).

As mentioned, this distinction is not categorical (but rather gradual), since Spinoza maintains that “the things we have shown so far are completely general and do not pertain more to man than to other individuals, all of which, though *in different degrees*, are nevertheless animate” (2p13s, my emphasis). Different things strive to persevere in being with different degrees of power. An increase in the power to persevere amounts to an increase in perfection. Spinoza equates a thing's power with its degree of perfection, and he understands perfection and reality to amount to the same thing (2D6). Accordingly, since perfection is a matter of degree (and not a matter of a difference in kind), it follows that reality is also gradual for Spinoza. Not only is reality gradual in terms of one body/mind containing more or less reality than another, but reality is also gradual in relation to one and the same object over time. This is so since “a particular thing's level of perfection and its essence [*conatus*] are one and the same” (Youpa 2003: 480). A thing's level of perfection (or power, or reality) is equivalent to a thing's degree of self-determination. For Spinoza, a thing can be more or less real or perfect depending on to what extent it is determined externally. God or Nature is fully real, or perfect, in the sense that it is completely self-determined and self-explained (1p14 by 1D1, 1D3). Everything else is – to different degrees – determined or caused by external things acting as intermediary causes (1p15d by 1D5). In sum, the extent to which something can be explained through itself and to which something can cause things corresponds to its degree of reality. Remember that for Spinoza, to exist is to be explainable. The striving to persevere in being is therefore a striving to become more self-determined, more self-explained and more real. We will look closer at this later, but for now it suffices to indicate that the more we understand about ourselves, the more we will be able to be the cause of ourselves and our own thoughts. To increase in perfection and reality is therefore the same as to come understand more about



oneself and of the chain of natural causation that one is bound up in. The more we understand this, the more self-determined we will become.

### **Spinoza's account of human nature: An anti-humanist perspective**

At this point we are in a good position to answer the question of how Spinoza can distinguish between humans and other finite modes despite his parallelism doctrine asserting that all bodies are paralleled by minds. As already touched upon, Spinoza's parallelism states that for every single body there is a corresponding idea and that substantially speaking these are the same thing only expressed in two different ways (2p7, 2p7s). Since the human body is composed of many smaller bodies, we have seen that it is nothing above or beyond a parcel of extended parts or smaller bodies. Likewise the human mind is composed of many ideas (one for every corresponding extended part) making for a collection of ideas that we call the mind. The mind, then, is perhaps best described as "a certain complex idea made up of very many other ideas" (Della Rocca 1996b: 7). The reason for the complexity of the human mind vis-à-vis the relative simplicity of the mind of a stone, for instance, is quite simply because of its greater number of ideas, which in turn is paralleled by the complexity (i.e., the many interacting parts) of the human body.<sup>13</sup>

Della Rocca (1996b, 2008: 89–136) argues that for Spinoza the mind is thoroughly representational. That is, due to the fact that for every single body there is a corresponding idea, "all mental states are representational – i.e. ideas – and that all features of mental states are to be explained in terms of representation" (Della Rocca 2008: 119). This has the radical implication that Spinoza "is not merely saying that affects and similar mental states somehow require or involve an idea" but "that ideas fully account for modes of thought such as love, desire, etc." (Della Rocca 2008: 120).<sup>14</sup> Hence, there are no non-representational mental states, and this will come to have consequences for Spinoza's understanding of the will and for his moral theory. We will return to this shortly when we discuss Spinoza's theory of the affects. This corresponds with Spinoza's rationalist outlook as it entails that mental states are explainable in the same way that extended bodies are explainable, as finite modes moved by other finite modes.

And so we may close in on the question of how to differentiate between a human being and a stone. While we have seen that there is no absolute or categorical difference between finite modes, Spinoza's ethical project still hinges on the notion that humans may in fact be singled out and discussed as something above and beyond the body/mind-parcel of a stone. On this issue, Spinoza writes the following:

However, we also cannot deny that ideas differ among themselves, as the objects themselves do, and that one is more excellent than the other, and contains more reality, just as the object of the one is more excellent than the object of the other and contains more reality. And so to determine



what is the difference between the human mind and the others, and how it surpasses them, it is necessary, as we have said, to know the nature of its object, that is, of the human body.

(2p13s)

A human being, then, appears to be different from other finite modes because it contains more reality. We have already seen that reality, for Spinoza, is gradual, but it remains to be seen how this gradualist conception relates to the nature of the human body. As Spinoza explains above, to find out more about the difference between the human mind and the mind of other finite modes we must look at the object of the human mind (i.e., its body). And by doing so, we return to the notion of the relative complexity of different mind/body-parcels. Hence, Spinoza suggests that “in proportion as a body is more capable than others of doing many things at once, or being acted on in many ways at once, so its mind is more capable than others of perceiving many things at once” (2p13s). This means that since the human body is composed of many different parts, and since each of these parts corresponds with an idea, the human being contains many more ideas (due to its many extended parts) than the stone does. Because of its many components (ideas), the human mind can perceive many different things and the human body, because of its many parts, can act (and be acted on) in many different ways.

This introduces the overarching motivation for Spinoza's moral theory. As we have seen above, a thing's relative complexity is tantamount to its identity, and this gradual difference is the only metaphysical difference between the finite mode of a stone and a human being. In addition, we have also established that the reality (perfection) of a mode can differ in relation to itself over time. What determines the particular degree of reality of a mode is its essence (i.e., its striving to persevere in being). It follows from this that “a mind's degree of reality can increase and decrease” (Youpa 2003: 480). This capacity of the mind to increase in reality and perfection is what constitutes the starting point for Spinoza's moral theory insofar as it means that increasing one's power of understanding is virtuous (remember that virtue, for Spinoza, is synonymous with power).

This brings us to what Melamed (2011) refers to as Spinoza's anti-humanism.<sup>15</sup> Melamed argues that for Spinoza, human beings are relatively “marginal and limited beings in an infinite universe” and that the problem with any moral theory founded on the notion that humanity somehow makes for a separate dominion within a dominion is that it tends to cause “people to believe that the world is arranged to fit their fictions and caprices” (Melamed 2011: 150). Any viable moral theory, for Spinoza, needs to take the fact that humans are marginal beings into account.

A more adequate understanding of human nature, according to Spinoza, not only affirms that there is no difference in kind among the finite modes, but in addition, that a thing's identity is bound up with the external forces that it encounters. Because the mind parallels the body, all thoughts are reflections of



embodied encounters. Accordingly, in 2p19 Spinoza asserts that “[t]he human mind does not know the human body itself, nor does it know that it exists, except through ideas of affections by which the body is affected.” That is, we think through the encounters we experience. And depending on the encounters we experience, our minds will be composed of different ideas. Not only will external bodies influence us insofar as they impinge on us in different ways, but as Spinoza notes in the fourth postulate after 2p13, “[t]he human body, to be preserved, requires a great many other bodies, by which it is, as it were, continually regenerated.” This makes the identity of the human mind and the human body necessarily bound up with other bodies and other minds. As Matthew Kisner notes:

It follows that our minds and, consequently, our beliefs, ideas and character, are shaped by the external forces acting on us. This way of thinking irretrievably problematizes the notion of an autonomous person as a discrete, self-defining, independent individual.

(2011: 232)

This adds another important piece to Spinoza’s account of human nature by highlighting the dependency of the human being on other finite modes. Rather than conceiving of cognition as something intrinsic and always already there, as is commonly done, Spinoza conceives of it as thoroughly relational. By doing so he underlines not only the fundamental similarity between the finite mode of a stone and the finite mode of a human being, but also the interdependency of the two. By claiming this dependency, Spinoza yet again reveals his naturalistic portrayal of nature where there is but one set of rules for everything that is. This is at the core of his anti-humanism, and it introduces another important aspect – besides the relative marginality of humans in nature – constraining his moral theory.

We are now in a good place to begin to sketch out the contours of Spinoza’s moral theory. This will allow us to evaluate the effects of Spinoza’s understanding of key moral notions like autonomy, freedom and good and evil in the light of his anti-humanism. Spinoza’s account of human autonomy and freedom will prove crucial for the enactment of his moral theory. This account obviously looks radically different from other – more traditional – accounts of autonomy as it must cater to the constraints posed by his naturalism. It is called for to note that this account of autonomy and freedom is indeed something that sets humans apart from other (less complex) finite modes, albeit not in any substantial sense. As we have seen, humans are only different from other finite modes to the extent that the human body/mind is more complex than other body/minds. Humans, to a higher degree than the finite modes of stones for instance, tend to be successful in their striving to not simply remain in the state they are presently in, but to actually *change their states* so as to perfect and empower themselves.<sup>16</sup> This qualitative enhancement of existence is crucial for understanding the educational implications of Spinoza’s philosophy. While this ability



to perfect oneself allows for a degree of freedom, it is important to note that it does not amount to any kind of absolute freedom. We will return to this important issue below when we look closer at Spinoza's moral theory. Let us first gain a better understanding of what moral knowledge (good and evil) amounts to for Spinoza given his anti-humanist account of human nature.

From Spinoza's understanding of virtue as power (4D8), we see that things are good to the extent that they bring about an increase in power. This means that from the perspective of nature as a whole, being already perfect, singular events are neither good nor evil in themselves.<sup>17</sup> This is so since singular events and bodies are to be understood as different expressions of substance striving to persevere in existence at the same time. As any given body will do this at the expense of other bodies – for example, a human being eating an apple will be strengthened in this act, while the body of the apple will clearly be weakened through it – it is merely a matter of a redistribution of power. From the perspective of nature – being the all-encompassing substance – the overall flow of power stays constant even though it shifts internally. Spinoza elaborates:

As far as good and evil are concerned, they also indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves, nor are they anything other than modes of thinking, *or* notions we form because we compare things to one another. For one and the same thing can, at the same time, be good, and bad, and also indifferent. For example, Music is good for one who is Melancholy, bad for one who is mourning, and neither good nor bad to one who is deaf.

(4pref)

Consequently, Spinoza's notions of good and evil are not privileging the human mind in any substantial sense. From the perspective of the experiencing body/mind, however, things can certainly be judged either good or evil. The method of determining whether something is good or evil is fairly straightforward, and Spinoza proposes that: "Insofar as a thing agrees with our nature, it is necessarily good" (4p31) and correspondingly, that "insofar as it is evil for us, it is contrary to us" (4p30). That is, identifying things that agree with our nature is the same as finding the things that will help us persevere in existence. This is not, however, quite as straightforward as it may seem at first. To persevere, for Spinoza, is not the same as simply surviving for as long as possible but rather to preserve and to enhance one's degree of reality and perfection as discussed above. All of this goes to strengthen the link between Spinoza's metaphysics, his account of human nature and his moral theory (see Garrett 2002).

### **Outlining Spinoza's moral theory: Egoism and the theory of the affects**

As we might expect by now, Spinoza's anti-humanism conditions his account of human psychology and its normative consequence: his moral theory. Michael



LeBuffe (2014) notes that this is most evident in two ways. First, it means that for Spinoza human beings follow the common order of nature. Human beings and their psychology must therefore – as we have just seen – be understood in the same way that we understand other finite modes. Accordingly, Spinoza famously remarks that he will consider human emotions “just as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies” (3pref). He does this by introducing his theory of the affects, which we will discuss in more detail in this section.

Second, it means that moral concepts derive from human psychology. As we saw above, for Spinoza, things are not good or bad in themselves but become either good or bad in relation to an ideal postulated by a human being striving for more power. This means that values such as good and evil are *modes of thinking* rather than values that are intrinsic in nature. From the particular perspective of a finite mode such as a human being, then, it makes sense to attribute moral labels to things and people insofar as these either aid or hinder the successful striving for self-preservation. From the point of view of nature qua substance, however, good and evil are meaningless terms as nature in itself is perfect and cannot be improved upon or be conceived to be lacking anything.<sup>18</sup> Since humans are nothing but finite modes among other finite modes in nature, there would be no reason to suppose that the human psychological tendency to attribute values to things have any bearing outside of the realm of human psychology. Hence, there is no reason to believe that what is helpful for the self-preservation of a human being is the same as what is helpful for the self-preservation of a stone as these different finite modes are made up of different relations of motion and rest. In sum, there is no metaphysical gulf between humans and other finite modes in nature and therefore no reason to believe that the human perspective is in any way privileged ontologically speaking.

When Spinoza introduces his theory of the affects in Part Three of the *Ethics*, he maps out a chart of human affects based on the notion that these are in fact best understood as a kind of “bodies” moved by other “bodies,” each bringing about an effect that is either strengthening or weakening for the overall health of the body/mind-parcel that is the individual human being. Affects, for Spinoza, are changes in the striving to persevere in being. Either we change for the better (i.e., we increase in power) or for the worse (i.e., we decrease in power). These changes either result from us being acted upon or from us acting. When we are acted upon, we experience passive affects, and when we act, we experience active affects. When we act, we always increase in power, and we experience this as a joy resulting from our ability to do more and to understand more. When we are acted upon, however, we may either experience joy (*laetitia*) if the encounter in question results in an increase in our power of acting, or we may experience sadness (*tristitia*) if the encounter results in a decrease in our power of acting. This means that while active affects always result in joy, passive affects can either result in joy or sadness depending on the power of the object encountered. In addition to joy and sadness, Spinoza also introduces a third type of primary affect that he labels desire. Desire, Della Rocca writes, “is simply the tendency to come to have an idea of a more powerful bodily state, an idea that



itself is a more powerful state” (2008: 157–158). Desire, then, is what prompts us to strive for joyous encounters and to avoid saddening encounters. Accordingly, in 3p28, Spinoza proposes that “[w]e strive to further the occurrence of whatever we imagine will lead to joy, and to avert or destroy what we imagine is contrary to it, or will lead to sadness.” The primary affects thereby set up a framework for Spinoza’s moral theory since they give us a good idea of what to strive for and what to avoid. Nadler explains:

Such changes in power form the motivational basis for the things that human beings do. Our pursuits and avoidances of things, our choices of action and our judgments about what is good and bad, are all moved by joy and sadness, love and hate, and pleasure and pain, by the modifications in our striving to persevere in existence.

(2014: 44)<sup>19</sup>

From these primary affects – joy, sadness and desire – Spinoza continues to deduce a host of other derivative affects that we recognize as human emotions. Much of Spinoza’s exposition of the affects in Part Three revolves around facilitating the recognition of different affects as being either affects of joy or affects of sadness. This, in turn, serves as a practical guide to the striving for self-preservation insofar as this striving hinges on the individual’s ability to successfully recognize which affective encounters will lead to a greater power of acting (joy) and which will lead to a lesser power of acting (sadness). This is an ethical question for Spinoza since, as we have seen above, the practical concepts of good and evil correspond with the successful and the unsuccessful acquisition of a greater power to act. And so, as LeBuffe remarks, “[t]he theory of the affects serves Spinoza’s ethical naturalism by introducing explanations of ethical concepts, most importantly the concepts of good, evil, and perfection, in psychological terms” (2014).

Spinoza’s theory of the affects highlights his psychological egoism, which follows as another consequence of his anti-humanist account of human nature. When, as Spinoza suggests, values such as good and evil are inescapably bound up with the particular perspectives of individual finite modes, and when the very essence of a human being is understood in terms of the striving to persevere in existence, it follows that the psychological motivation of a human being is basically egoistic. As discussed above, since virtue, for Spinoza, is synonymous with power (4D8), his psychological egoism entails that what is good is quite simply what leads to an increase in the power to act (i.e., in the increased capacity to cause things). Since different finite modes strive to increase in power simultaneously, however, it would seem that what is virtuous for one individual may – at least potentially – be detrimental to another.<sup>20</sup> In 4a1 Spinoza ascertains that: “There is no singular thing in Nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger. Whatever one is given, there is another more powerful by which the first can be destroyed.”

As mentioned above, besides the transitions to greater or lesser power of acting – joy and sadness – Spinoza posits another primary affect, namely desire.



In 3p9s Spinoza defines desire as “[a]ppetite together with consciousness of the appetite.” Appetite, for Spinoza, designates the perseverance in being from the point of view of the body and mind taken together. Desire, then, is equivalent with the human essence (the *conatus*) along with the consciousness of this essence, illustrating how human affects follow the common order of nature. Accordingly, human behavior is determined, not by a desire to attain certain goods because they are deemed to be good, but by the basic striving to persevere in being. It follows from this, as we have just seen, that values such as good and evil are relative terms insofar as something is only good to the extent that it aids one’s striving to persevere in being. And so, Spinoza concludes that “we neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it” (3p9s).<sup>21</sup> Human desire, then, is inescapably bound up with self-interest.

Understanding the conscious striving for self-preservation as the main driving force behind human behavior presumes a thoroughly deterministic understanding of things like human desire, appetite and will. In accordance with his naturalism, Spinoza defines the will in the same way as he does appetite (as the striving to persevere) except in relation to the mind only (3p9s). If the act of willing something, say of desiring a cold drink of water on a hot day, is causally determined by the striving for self-preservation, then this obviously cannot be understood in terms of an uncaused choice (i.e., an act of free will) on behalf of the thirsty person. Instead, this act of willing must be understood in terms of an instantiation of the desire to persevere in being, conditioned by the specific circumstances of a particularly hot day.<sup>22</sup>

Much like with the will, Spinoza’s theory of the affects reconstructs all of the concepts generally associated with human emotions – concepts that play an important role in shaping our moral judgments. In line with his naturalism, Spinoza relates all human emotions to the primary affects of desire, joy and sadness. By doing so he shows that love, for example, is a form of joy (accompanied by the idea of an external cause, i.e., directed at someone who affect us with joy) and hate a form of sadness (accompanied by an external cause, i.e., directed at someone who affects us with sadness) (3DOE 6+7), and that hope is a form of anticipated joy (triggered by the idea of something about which we have doubts) and fear a form of anticipated sadness (again, triggered by the idea of something about which have doubts) (3DOE 12+13) and so on. Accordingly, we see that becoming more aware of our affects will help us see what we are determined to strive for, and this, in turn, will allow us a certain degree of influence over our lives in the sense that we may then act consciously in accordance with our nature.

In order to understand what the moral consequences of this conception of human emotions are, it is called for to investigate Spinoza’s views on the human capacity to act and to influence one’s well-being in the light of his anti-humanism, precluding a free will in any ordinary sense. Spinoza’s understanding of freedom is both deterministic and necessitarian. He defines freedom



as follows: “That thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone” (1D7). Freedom for Spinoza is understood as one’s power of acting. The only thing that can live up to this kind of freedom – by virtue of having absolute power of acting – is God, being both self-caused and completely self-determined. Humans, on the other hand, are externally caused modes and can therefore never attain freedom in this absolute sense. Instead, human freedom amounts to the striving for self-determination while recognizing that absolute power of acting is beyond the scope of human nature. It follows that freedom in relation to humans is not a matter of whether our actions are causally determined or not, but rather “*how* our actions are determined, by internal or external causes” (Kisner 2011: 18).

The striving for self-determination introduces Spinoza’s foremost moral imperative insofar as it motivates his account of values. Since human freedom is the same as an increased power of acting, and since we already know that power and virtue amount to the same thing (4D8), it becomes clear that what is good is simply what increases our power to act. What increases our power to act, in turn, is a better understanding of our affects so as to be able to recognize (with more precision) what will enable us to persevere in being. As is evident from his definition of virtue, it “lacks any peculiarly moral sense: anything good for us, even obviously amoral activities such as eating or drinking, contributes to our virtue” (Kisner 2011: 81).

Thus, value judgments are particular and relational rather than general and absolute. This illustrates the psychological nature of moral labels. As we have seen, good and evil are only applicable from the limited perspective of human psychology since they are inevitably connected with the striving for perfection of complex finite modes like humans. Since God or Nature is perfect and completely free, it would be nonsensical to attribute moral evaluations to it. Labels like good and evil are only useful insofar as they help us perfect ourselves. The problem is, Spinoza argues, that humans have a tendency to ascribe this way of thinking to God and to nature and thereby wrongfully attribute teleological thinking and moral motivation to a substance that is necessarily non-teleological and amoral (as it is conceived as perfect and therefore non-striving). In the Appendix to Part One of the *Ethics* Spinoza writes:

All the prejudices I here undertake to expose depend on this one: that men commonly suppose that all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end; indeed, they maintain as certain that God himself directs all things to some certain end, for they say that God has made all things for man, and man that he might worship God. So I shall begin by considering this one prejudice, asking *first* [I] why most people are satisfied that it is true, and why all are so inclined by nature to embrace it. *Then* [II] I shall show its falsity, and *finally* [III] how, from this, prejudices have arisen concerning *good and evil, merit and sin, praise and blame, order and confusion, beauty and ugliness*, and other things of this kind.



While the problem described in the quote above concerns the limitations of human cognition, it also highlights a problem with the practical application of value labels. Misconstruing value labels as objective and divine tends to disguise their psychological nature, making it more difficult to identify the things that really will benefit the striving to persevere in being. What is needed is an understanding of value better equipped for answering to the specific needs of human beings. This, according to Spinoza, can be remedied by relating values to a more realistic ideal than the anthropomorphic image of God where human emotions and psychological states are being displaced from the common order of nature.

This is where Spinoza's conception of *the free man* (4p66s–4p73) comes into play. The free man is an ideal image that Spinoza constructs so as to aid people in their striving for perfection. The free man is free in the sense of having achieved an absolute power of acting. As we have seen, the human power of acting translates into active affects and the self-determination of the human body and mind. A human being determined only by active affects amounts to a fully rational being. The free man is therefore best described in terms of a fully rational being. What it means to be fully rational is something that we will return to later when we discuss the connection between Spinoza's epistemology and ethics. It is clear, however, that this fully rational being appears to be an unattainable ideal from the point of view of humans, who are always externally determined to some degree. The ideal of the free man is nevertheless important for illustrating how a fully rational person would approach things, being untainted by passive affects. Since this way of understanding things is impossible for humans, who are always more or less determined by passive affects, the free man may be, as Kisner (2011) argues, best understood as a kind of thought experiment on Spinoza's part. Not only is the free man an unattainable ideal in the sense that it proposes a person completely liberated from passive affects, but it can also be counterproductive to act in accordance with this ideal of a fully rational person when one is in fact not – and can never be – fully rational. Justin Steinberg offers an illustrating example: “For instance, even if an ideally rational person would have no need to study for a logic exam, it would be patently foolish for most young logic students to emulate the ideal or to take the description of an ideal agent as prescriptive for them” (2014: 182).

### **Spinoza's ethics of self-preservation: Toward empowerment**

As we have seen (and as we will look deeper into in this section), Spinoza denies the reality of good and evil and the existence of a free will, and so this obviously begs the question of what, in fact, his ethical theory hinges on. Because if Spinoza's philosophy is to stand as a model for a credible account of ethics of education, this would appear to require that there is a coherent account of ethics there to begin with. That is, it seems to require that there is an actual object of study (i.e., a positive account of ethics), beyond the denial of the relevance of traditional moral concepts.



Spinoza does in fact make use of many traditional moral concepts – concepts that have been central for ethics at least since Aristotle. He speaks at length of virtue, of human freedom, of good and evil and of the highest good attainable for humans. Indeed, in his political writings he draws up a compelling vision of an ethical community to strive for collectively. All of these matters, however, are conditioned by Spinoza's strong sense of naturalism (his substance monism and the causal determinism that follows from this) and by his anti-humanist account of human nature. It is the tension between traditional moral concepts and the specific conditions that Spinoza's philosophy sets up that needs to be investigated further in order to arrive at a plausible explanation of how Spinoza's ethics can be said to live up to its name.

Spinoza's ethical account does not fit neatly into any existing category of ethical theory. While it shares key elements with Aristotelian virtue ethics,<sup>23</sup> with Hobbesian contractualism,<sup>24</sup> with the deontological ethics of Kant<sup>25</sup> and with the utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill,<sup>26</sup> neither of these theories satisfactorily encompasses or fully corresponds with Spinoza's ethical ideas. In fact, LeBuffe (2010) argues that Spinoza may be described as being an ethical perfectionist, a virtue ethicist as well as a consequentialist, all at the same time. He is a perfectionist, LeBuffe claims, in that he clearly holds that “we ought to be guided in how we lead our lives by the project of improving ourselves” (LeBuffe 2010: 170). In addition, he could be argued to belong to the tradition of virtue ethics as he hinges ethics on the striving for a virtuous life guided by benevolence and love. This concern for others is always motivated by egoism however. Hence, Nadler explains that Spinoza's virtuous person

will treat others in such a way that their own *conatus* or power of acting is increased (which is what virtue is) and that their life is thereby improved. And he will do so because he, egoistically motivated that he is, recognizes through reason alone that it is to his own benefit to do so.

(2014: 50–51)

Similarly, Spinoza may be interpreted as a consequentialist in the sense that he, as we have seen above, understands the good in terms of that which is useful for the successful striving to persevere in being (4D1). Given Spinoza's perfectionist understanding of existence, however, it is perhaps better, as LeBuffe suggests, to label it “a consequentialism couched in perfectionist terms” (2010: 174).

Hence, one might say that Spinoza's ethics is founded on the claim that we are determined – by our essence – to consciously desire “all and only those objects that we associate with *laetitia* [joy] and we are consciously averse to all and only those objects that we associate with *tristitia* [sadness]” (2010: 136). This, in combination with the fact that we tend to mistake the seemingly good for the truly good, is what motivates Spinoza's formulation of ethical guidelines. These guidelines aim at facilitating the acquisition of knowledge about myself and about my relations with external things as this knowledge will help me to distinguish the good from the bad. The better I know myself, the better I will



be at evaluating what is truly good in the sense that it will help me preserve and enhance my perfection. A better understanding of myself and of the changes I undergo as a result of my encounters with external things amounts to a greater power to act in accordance with this understanding. In terms of ethics, a greater degree of mental freedom means that a person is less enslaved by harmful passive affects by virtue of understanding the necessity of things as they follow from being caused by the infinite substance (1p17s). The moderation of passive affects is not a matter of eliminating them altogether, as this is impossible, but rather to “eliminate only the kinds of passivity and passions that harm our power” (Kisner 2011: 8) and in doing so restrict our freedom. Since to be free is to be rational, human freedom is a matter of degrees of understanding and an increase in one’s understanding will lead to a better concept of the good in the sense that it will be “more productive of the things that we find valuable” (LeBuffe 2010: 166). Again, it is important to highlight that this is gradual since understanding all things fully would mean understanding things like God or Nature does. This, as we have seen, is the way Spinoza’s free man understands things, but this is an ideal image that no one could ever hope to live up to. This is important to keep in mind since it has consequences for education insofar as education has to take passive affects – as a part of human nature – into account.

The ethical goal, then, comes down to a striving for self-determination insofar as this means a gradual increase in our understanding of ourselves and of nature as well as the ability to act on this knowledge in our daily lives. This makes for the core of Spinoza’s ethical project, and the extent to which we can acquire this kind of self-determination is tantamount to our degree of freedom. Eugene Marshall explicates:

Human freedom is not to be contrasted with our causal dependency on Nature, but with *bondage*, our lack of self-determination *in our actions*. Though we still have a degree of passivity, and thus bondage, simply in virtue of having the inadequate ideas of sensation, we can minimize our passivity and bondage both by forming the adequate ideas of sensation *and* by acting on them, which is how Spinoza tells us to proceed.

(2014: 174)

The egoistic ideal of self-determination may appear to be at odds with Spinoza’s explicit claim that the “greatest virtue is to know God” (4p28). For this to make sense, it is important to note that the knowledge of God does not amount to religious mysticism for Spinoza. Instead it is attained through the increased knowledge of the affections of the body (5p15) – the body being a mode, or expression of power, of God. It is, in this sense, a very practical matter of getting to know the workings of your own body as this knowledge will automatically amount to a deeper knowledge of God and of nature as a whole. Since understanding the body, for Spinoza, involves understanding the causal network of the body, and since God is the immanent cause of everything in nature, it follows that when we gain true knowledge of the object of the idea



of our mind – our body – we will simultaneously gain true knowledge of its cause (i.e., God). As Spinoza suggests in 5p14 this is because “[t]he mind can bring it about that all the body’s affections, *or* images of things, are related to the idea of God” and consequently, in 5p15 that “[h]e who understands himself and his affects clearly and distinctly loves God, and does so the more, the more he understands himself and his affects.” This is important as it will come to have some crucial consequences for the pedagogical implications of Spinoza’s ethics. It does provide us with a crucial key for understanding Spinoza’s ethics insofar as it entails that a better understanding of oneself will lead to an appreciation of the interconnectedness of things of a similar nature, and consequently to the realization of one’s dependency on the well-being of others. Spinoza’s ethical theory, it seems, is not quite as egoistically inclined as it might first appear.

### **What’s in it for education? Introducing the mental health perspective**

It remains to be seen, then, what all this implies for the conception of a Spinozistic account of education. In order to begin to unravel this, it is helpful to take a look at Spinoza’s own understanding of the means and goals of education. Since Spinoza never actually wrote any extensive texts explicitly on education, we must look for other ways of arriving at his views on education. One way of doing this is to look at Spinoza’s curious method of presenting his philosophy in the *Ethics*.

Spinoza’s method of exposition in the *Ethics* is commonly known as a form of Euclidean geometry. This means the book is organized in a deductive and systematic form based on definitions, axioms, propositions and demonstrations. As we have seen, Spinoza claims that human emotions are best explained in geometrical terms, which is why he approaches them in a formal manner, as “lines, planes, and bodies” (3pref). Spinoza’s reason for presenting his philosophy geometrically hinges on a belief on his part that we, as humans, can – potentially at least – acquire true knowledge about the nature of the world and about ourselves, but that if we are to do so we need to look beyond our perspectival prejudices and superstitions. This is connected with Spinoza’s overall rationalist persuasion insofar as it entails that things are – generally speaking – explainable. In the next chapter we will look closer at just how we can arrive at a plausible explanation of things and how this path to an increased knowledge is intertwined with the ethical path to freedom. This way we will come to see that understanding, for Spinoza, is very much an ethical concept.

Constructing an account of education based on Spinoza’s ethics amounts to introducing a way by which people may understand things (and themselves in particular) better so they can then act in accordance with this rational understanding. By acting in accordance with this rational understanding, people will be more in control of their emotional responses as they are less prone to be thrown between hope and fear by various external forces. We will see that in translating Spinoza’s ethics into an educational ideal, the overarching aim of education may be understood in terms of the promotion of mental



health. As Garrett notes: “For Spinoza’s is fundamentally an ethics of *mental health*, in which one achieves a healthy power to control the direction of one’s affects through knowledge of their causes” (1996: 308). Being mentally healthy, according to Spinoza’s account of the affects, means that one consciously strives for the things that actually help one in improving one’s existence by understanding more so as to be able to live more. Consequently, I aim to argue that to live more, for Spinoza, is not the same as simply enduring in existence. Instead, it means perfecting oneself qualitatively so as to gradually become more empowered and more self-determined and thereby also less determined by the many external forces necessarily impinging upon one’s body and mind.

Deducing a focus on mental health from the *Ethics* will obviously have some rather radical implications for a Spinozistic account of education: namely that education would be essentially geared toward the promotion of mental health and conversely, to the combating of mental illness. What this means, more specifically, is something that we will spend much of the remainder of this book unpacking and investigating. We will begin this undertaking in the next chapter by investigating how adequate ideas can contribute to mental health, and we will continue in Chapter Three by examining some of the implications of positing self-preservation as an educational ideal.

In the next chapter we will move on to Spinoza’s epistemology so as to get a better idea of what, more precisely, constitutes an adequate idea and how this differs from ideas that are deemed inadequate. This, of course, is crucial for education since a Spinozistic account of education focuses on the students’ ability to form reliable knowledge of the affects and to disconnect the ideas of the affects from ideas of external causes as far as possible in order to function as a means for personal deliberation and empowerment.

## Notes

- 1 For another, more biographical, account of Spinoza’s relation to Descartes and Cartesian philosophy see Nadler’s *Spinoza: A Life* (1999).
- 2 For example, historian of philosophy Jonathan Israel argues that: “In fact, no one else during the century 1650–1750 remotely rivaled Spinoza’s notoriety as the chief challenger of the fundamentals of revealed religion, received ideas, tradition, morality, and what was everywhere regarded, in absolutist and non-absolutist states alike, as divinely constituted political authority” (2001: 159). Although this quote does not specifically address metaphysics, it is clear that this challenge arises (or flows) from Spinoza’s metaphysics, which, for instance, declares the notion of the immortality of the human soul to be an irrational superstition; a conclusion that Descartes – despite his rationalist leanings – shies away from. For a discussion on Spinoza’s radical brand of rationalism – his so-called naturalism – see Bennett (1984: 36), Della Rocca (1996a: 192) and Garrett (1996: 270). For an account of Spinoza’s break with the Aristotelian legacy of the Cartesians, see Nadler (2006: 54–55, 66). For an account of Spinoza’s radical break with Cartesianism, written from a contemporary neuroscientific point of view, see Damasio (2004). Also, with reference to Spinoza’s break with what may be labeled the modern humanism of Cartesianism, Melamed suggests “that Spinoza is the arch anti-humanist of modernity” (2013b: E1) and, elsewhere, that “Spinoza was in fact the most radical *anti-humanist* among modern philosophers” (2011: 148).



- 3 I borrow the term “building blocks” from Melamed (2013c).
- 4 For a discussion on Spinoza as a causal rationalist see Bennett (1984: 29–32).
- 5 To be specific, for Spinoza, every effect is also a cause of something else. Accordingly, in 1p36 Spinoza states: “Nothing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow.”
- 6 For Spinoza this is a matter of inherence and so in 1a1 he establishes that: “Whatever is, is either in itself or in another.”
- 7 When Descartes speaks of minds, he is referring specifically to human minds, as humans are the only thinking finite substances he acknowledges. Accordingly, in his *Discourse on the Method* Descartes establishes that “after the error of those who deny God . . . there is none that leads weak minds further from the straight path of virtue than that of imagining that the souls of the beasts are of the same nature as ours” (CSM vol. 2: 141).
- 8 Descartes refers to God as the “uncreated and independent thinking substance” (*Principles* I, 54/CSM vol. 1: 211). That God is not considered an extended substance may be deduced from the fact that Descartes ascertains that each substance has only *one* principle attribute (53). Hence, as Garrett notes, “Descartes is clear that God is not extended, and his reasons for thinking that God is not extended presumably parallel . . . his reasons for thinking that finite minds are not extended” (2009: 85).
- 9 For an extended discussion on Spinoza and the notion that to exist is to be explainable see Della Rocca’s (2003, 2008: 4–5) discussion on Spinoza’s use of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR).
- 10 For an extended discussion on Spinoza’s panpsychism see Bennett (1984: 135–139) and Della Rocca (1996b: 7–9).
- 11 It follows from this that Spinoza rejects a teleological understanding of nature and consequently that his understanding of God precludes the image of a purposeful God acting from a plan (1p32c, 1p33d, s2) as this would clearly intervene with his notion of God or Nature as perfect (in the sense that it entails that God would then act in order to compensate for a felt lack, which would render God imperfect). Instead he claims that this mistaken notion can be traced back to the human psychological tendency to wrongfully attribute moral concepts and teleological reasoning to God or Nature as part of the misconception that nature would somehow be ordered to serve the needs of humans specifically (1app). The kind of non-intentional striving that Spinoza has in mind is perhaps better understood like this: “Acorns strive to become trees, not in the sense they intend or plan to become trees, but rather in the sense that acorns causally act to bring about changes such that they become trees” (Kisner 2011: 88). Striving, for Spinoza (much like for Descartes), is therefore a non-psychological notion, and as Della Rocca notes, striving (as well as tending) describes “what a given object will do unless prevented by external causes” (1996a: 195).
- 12 For an extended discussion on Spinoza’s conception of immanent causes see Melamed (2006).
- 13 This complexity is not simply due to the many parts of the human body and mind. What makes a complex mode complex is the fact that together these many parts bring about “a single self-sustaining effect” whereas a mere collection of simpler modes “each exercise their power” although these expressions of power “do not together constitute an individual” and, hence, “[t]he effects they each bring about are not together one joint, self-sustaining effect” (Marshall 2013: 85–86).
- 14 In 2a3 Spinoza writes: “There are no modes of thinking, such as love, desire, or whatever is designated by the word affects of the mind, unless there is in the same individual the idea of the thing loved, desired, and the like.”
- 15 For the purpose of avoiding unnecessary confusion it is important to note that the term anti-humanism, in this context, does not in any way refer to a disinterest in matters concerning human affairs on Spinoza’s part. To be sure, Spinoza’s philosophy is very much centered on specifically human concerns, such as the question of ethics and the forming of an ethical society. Instead, it concerns Spinoza’s refusal to treat humanity as a brute fact that is somehow exempt from the common order of nature – something that would clearly violate Spinoza’s overarching naturalism.



- 16 It is important to remind ourselves at this point of Spinoza's naturalism, which, as we have seen, precludes any kind of substantial difference between humans and other finite modes. This entails that the striving for an increased power of acting is not exclusive to humans, but that in virtue of the relative complexity of the human body/mind it is more pronounced than with a stone, for instance. The difference, however, is gradual. Accordingly, in the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza concludes that "each thing in itself has a striving to preserve itself in its state, and bring itself to a better one" (KV I.5/C: 84).
- 17 Jonathan Bennett gives a good example of a common mistake that from Spinoza's point of view would reveal the underlying anthropocentrism of most people's way of perceiving nature as governed by moral standards: "We tend to think there is something intrinsically wrong or bad or substandard about a child with leukemia; but Spinoza would say that a child that has leukemia is a perfect specimen of one kind of natural object, and is not evidence that Nature has made a mistake" (1986: 67).
- 18 For example, in the preface of Part Three of the *Ethics*, Spinoza establishes that "nothing happens in Nature which can be attributed to any defect in it, for Nature is always the same, and its virtue and power of acting are everywhere one and the same" (3pref). For expressions of the relativity of good and evil in Spinoza see 4pref in the *Ethics*. For further examples see also the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TIE 5), and the *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being* (KV I.10; KV II.4).
- 19 Marshall, in his recent book on Spinoza's philosophy of mind, understands affects as "ideas that express their power in a way that impacts the conatus" (2013: 194n). This understanding is helpful insofar as it accounts for the intimate connection between the affects and Spinoza's ethical project of self-preservation.
- 20 Which is what will happen when two bodies, whose nature do not agree, encounter one another insofar as a thing "is opposed to everything which can take its existence away" (3p6d).
- 21 It follows from this that humans, for Spinoza, act teleologically, as they strive (by their nature) to improve and perfect themselves. God or Nature, however, does not, as God or Nature is conceived as perfect. Hence, Spinoza rejects divine teleology while allowing for teleological thinking with regards to human psychology specifically. As Carriero notes, this means that "even though my nature is not structured about an end . . . it remains true for Spinoza that I have a natural tendency toward understanding and I become more perfect . . . and stronger . . . the more and better I understand" (2014: 24).
- 22 In Letter 58, for example, Spinoza writes: "This, then, is that human freedom which all men boast of possessing, and which consists solely in this, that men are conscious of their desire and unaware of the causes by which they are determined. In the same way a baby thinks that it freely desires milk, an angry child revenge, and a coward flight" (S: 909).
- 23 For example, Spinoza endorses a *eudaimonistic* view on ethics highlighting the importance of developing a virtuous character for reaching a state of happiness in ways that are reminiscent of Aristotelian character training (see Kisner 2011: 226).
- 24 Spinoza, like Hobbes, extracts his normative ethical account from a notion of natural law. They differ, Kisner argues, in that Spinoza "understands the natural law as indicating not the means to satisfying our desires [as Hobbes does], but rather the actions that follow from the power of adequate ideas" (2011: 118).
- 25 Spinoza and Kant share the common understanding that "we become autonomous by assuming the perspective of reason" (and acting in accordance with moral rules) but they differ in that Spinoza claims "that practical normative claims are based in self-interest" while Kant "holds that the perspective of reason transcends our own self-interested motives, concerns, and feelings" (Kisner 2011: 130–131).
- 26 As Kisner points out, Spinoza's ethics seems to agree with utilitarianism in that "the fundamental measure of value is the good, which is connected to a kind of happiness" (2011: 84). However, it departs from this tradition insofar as "he determines goods and their value with respect to one's own flourishing" rather than from "an agent-neutral perspective" which would be the case with utilitarianism (84).



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## 2 To be educated is to exist more

### Spinoza's gradualist notion of reality

This chapter serves to illustrate how the striving for an ethical life, for Spinoza, amounts to a better understanding of the nature of the world. Insofar as education concerns enhancing the understanding of the student, *education is therefore always an ethical enterprise*. For Spinoza, epistemology and ethics are clearly very closely related. This means that in order to see how to become ethical, we must investigate the premises for how we can understand things better, or as Spinoza puts it, how we can understand them *adequately*. A conclusion of this chapter is that education is concerned with gaining a better understanding of ourselves and the world. Gaining a better – as in more adequate – understanding of ourselves and the world, in turn, is ethical insofar as it will contribute to the empowerment and self-determination of the student. We have already seen that an increased degree of self-determination corresponds with an increased degree of reality. In this chapter I will suggest that it follows from this that to be educated, from a Spinozistic point of view, is to exist more.

### Adequate ideas as the key to a virtuous life

As we have seen in the previous chapter, to be self-determined, for Spinoza, means being the cause of one's ideas. When we are the cause of our ideas, Spinoza understands these ideas to be adequate. This simply means that we have access to the causal explanation of the object of an idea, and consequently, that we are then in a position to understand it fully. Being finite modes, humans have a limited ability to access the full causal chain of an idea in this sense. In the previous chapter we established that God or Nature is the cause of everything that is by virtue of being the only self-caused, self-sustained and self-explained thing. All things are therefore in, and follow from, God or Nature. This goes for all finite bodies and minds. Insofar as an idea is in God or Nature it is always adequate as adequacy, for Spinoza, is coextensive with being something's cause. Because God or Nature is the cause of the idea (either directly or by way of other intermediary causes), the causal chain explaining the idea in question is contained within the mind of God or Nature. Since all ideas are in God or Nature, that would seem to render all ideas adequate. Consequently, in 2p32, Spinoza maintains that “[a]ll ideas,



insofar as they are related to God, are true.” Truth, for Spinoza, is related to adequacy insofar as all adequate ideas are true by virtue of explaining the object represented (by 2p32).

Truth, however, is a nonsensical concept from the perspective of God or Nature. Just like the concepts of beauty and ugliness (or Good and Evil) are nonsensical – since these concepts always imply an external model in relation to which something is striving to perfect itself – so the concept of truth loses its validity in relation to something that knows no falsity. Since falsity, for Spinoza, is understood as “consisting in the privation of knowledge” (2p35) it follows that to have inadequate ideas involves lacking information. This obviously does not apply to a mind that is conceived to understand everything, but from the perspective of limited minds who are neither self-determined nor self-explained it certainly does (2p36d). Truth and falsity, then, much like moral concepts like Good and Evil only make sense from the perspective of finite minds striving to perfect themselves.

This goes to motivate why the foremost moral imperative of Spinoza’s ethics is that we should increase our degree of understanding about ourselves and the world so as to increase our own power of acting (in keeping with our essence qua *conatus*). It also, however, obviously raises imperative questions concerning our epistemological possibilities as finite modes. That is, what kind of knowledge can we expect to gain about ourselves and about the world around us? And how, more precisely, do we acquire this knowledge? These are important questions, not least if we are to construe a coherent educational account based on Spinoza’s ethics. Such an account would seem to require some practical guidelines concerning the method whereby one acquires knowledge as well as some guiding notions concerning the scope and limits of human understanding. In Part Two of the *Ethics* – titled ‘Of the nature and origin of the mind’ – Spinoza offers his account of epistemology, and so it is here that we will find crucial information needed for investigating these queries further. Before looking closer at Spinoza’s epistemological taxonomy in 2p40s2, however, it will be helpful to start by reviewing Spinoza’s understanding of adequate knowledge vis-à-vis the limited cognitive abilities of human beings.

### **The limited cognition of a human being**

As we have just seen, to know something adequately, for Spinoza, is to know how it is caused.<sup>1</sup> As he puts it in 1a4: “The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause.” Since everything except God – being self-caused – is an effect of something else, this means that everything we come across in the world must be explained through something else and so on in an infinite chain of causation. From this we see quite clearly the inherent problem with attempting to explain particular things. As finite modes, we simply do not have access to the information we need since the chain of causes far exceeds the scope of our cognitive capacities. Leaving this difficulty aside for the moment,



we can establish that for Spinoza causation and understanding are intimately linked. A true definition of something therefore involves a causal understanding of it. The definition of a circle, for example, explains how it is made – it comprises a mental plan or design for making a circle. A circle should therefore be defined as a point moving at a fixed distance from a given point rather than by supplying a description of what it looks like or of its different properties. The same goes for anything else. A true definition of a thing makes for a map of its making. To understand something, then, is to see clearly how it has come into being. As Wallace Matson notes, for Spinoza “to understand is to be able – at least in thought – to produce” (1990: 86).

On a side note, there is an interesting educational connection to be made between Spinoza’s understanding of a true definition and Vygotsky’s notion of scientific concepts. As Jan Derry points out, concepts for Vygotsky “are only meaningful, and hence, only concepts, when they comprise elements of a system of connections that is historically constituted” (2013: 21). This clearly illustrates the overlapping understanding of Spinoza and Vygotsky regarding their rationalist point of departure, stating that to understand something is to explain it in connection to other things.

If this is taken for a kind of practical standard for determining whether or not we know something adequately, then it seems that most of us know very little indeed. If I look before me (at the moment of writing this text) at the cluttered desk with books, a computer, papers and all manner of other things, then I cannot truthfully say that I can give you a proper definition of any of these things – at least not if this definition is to provide you with an accurate mental map of their making. The reason for this is, as explained above, that all of these things before me are bound up in an infinite chain of causes of which I obviously know very little. The easiest thing for me, lacking this knowledge, is to generally assume that all of these things are before me because they are of use to me. The computer is there so that I can type out this text, the books so that I can read and cite various useful sources and thereby qualify the text as being of sufficient academic standard, the pen and paper so that I can note things I wish to remember in the meantime, et cetera. In keeping with this I often apply the same way of understanding to things that, unlike the computer, cannot be described as man-made objects. I may for instance assume that the sun is in the sky to provide sunlight so that I may see what I am writing and so that I may be kept sufficiently warm while writing it; that night settles so that I may find rest from my work and sleep so as to recuperate my body so that I may work some more in the morning and so on. This approach to everyday things and objects is, Spinoza claims, a common misrepresentation on the part of humans and human imagination. Lacking adequate knowledge of nature, Spinoza argues, humans tend to look to themselves and to their own teleological motivation and assume that nature functions in a similarly purposeful way. This then gives rise to a providential image of God, portraying God as a purposeful being with the power to arrange all of nature so as to satisfy the demands of humans since humans are assumed to be specifically chosen by God. This for



Spinoza is nothing but hubris born out of ignorance of natural causes. In a key passage in the Appendix to Part One of the *Ethics* he writes that because people are determined to act on account of an end (i.e., their advantage) and because they typically lack knowledge of the natural causes of things, they tend to

turn toward themselves, and reflect on ends by which they are usually determined to do such things; so they necessarily judge the temperament of the other from their own temperament. Furthermore, they find – both in themselves and outside themselves – many means that are very helpful in seeking their own advantage, for example, eyes for seeing, teeth for chewing, plants and animals for food, the sun for light, the sea for supporting fish . . . Hence, they consider all natural things as means to their own advantage. And knowing that they had found these means, not provided them for themselves, they had reason to believe that there was someone else who had prepared those means for their use. For after they considered things as means, they could not believe that the things had made themselves; but from the means they were accustomed to prepare for themselves, they had to infer that there was a ruler, or a number of rulers, of Nature, endowed with human freedom, who had taken care of all things for them, and made all things for their use.

Spinoza's point is that not only is this the result of a confused understanding of the causal order of things in the world, but that it is actually counterproductive to the ethical striving for self-preservation and empowerment. This is so since when things don't behave the way we expect them to, which in all fairness is quite often the case, we tend to become disappointed and our desires are frustrated. And so our unfulfilled expectations on things around us result in a mental frustration and in a gradual diminishing of our power of acting. Since this is due to the misconception that things should behave according to our expectations rather than according to the causal order of nature, it is quite clear that this frustration will occur again and again. This is especially true since our strategies for determining the value of things generally arise from this confused understanding. As we saw in the previous chapter, this has given rise to a host of evaluative labels that ascribe intrinsic qualities to things that can only be made sense of in relation to a desiring person. Recall the following quote, where Spinoza writes:

After men persuaded themselves that everything which happens, happens on their account, they had to judge that what is most important in each thing is what is most useful to them, and to rate as most excellent all those things by which they were most pleased. Hence, they had to form these notions, by which they explained natural things: *good, evil, order, confusion, warm, cold, beauty, ugliness*. And because they think themselves free, these notions have arisen: *praise and blame, sin and merit*.

(1app)

The example Spinoza gives in the quote above amounts to an inadequate description of nature as it mistakes effects for causes and as it modifies the



image of external things according to the psychological and cognitive responses of the perceiving person. As a result we end up with a decidedly anthropomorphic (and teleological) image of God and of nature. Following from his anti-humanistic account of human nature discussed in Chapter One, this is an image that Spinoza labels inadequate as it tells us less about the thing we attempt to describe and more about our own perceptive faculties and emotional response to that thing. In a letter to Henry Oldenburg, addressing this problem, Spinoza writes that “I do not attribute to Nature beauty, ugliness, order or confusion. It is only with respect to our imagination that things can be said to be beautiful, ugly, well-ordered or confused” (Letter 32, S: 848). The problem for Spinoza is that this modified image risks furthering a prejudiced conception of nature where everything is measured according to the limited perspective of the human cognitive faculties. As a consequence, any given expression of nature that is not immediately pleasing to our senses is automatically deemed imperfect and at fault. In another letter, this time to Hugo Boxel, Spinoza illustrates the logical fallacy of this way of thinking via the example of an anthropomorphic image of God:

Further, when you say that you do not see what sort of God I have if I deny in him the actions of seeing, hearing, attending, willing etc., and that he possesses those faculties in an eminent degree, I suspect that you believe there is no greater perfection than can be explicated by the aforementioned attributes. I am not so surprised, for I believe that a triangle, if it could speak, would likewise say that God is eminently triangular, and a circle that God's nature is eminently circular. In this way each would ascribe to God its own attributes, assuming itself to be like God and regarding all else as ill-formed.

(Letter 56, S: 904)

To correct this inadequate and superstitious understanding of the world is a central concern for the ethical striving for self-determination. In order to facilitate this ethical striving, Spinoza posits three kinds of knowledge available to humans: imagination, reason and intuitive knowledge. The first kind of knowledge (imagination) yields inadequate ideas whereas the second and third kinds (reason and intuitive knowledge) yield adequate ideas. It is important to note that Spinoza does not assume that we can transition smoothly from one stage to the next, but rather, that while we tend to perceive things by way of our imagination (inadequately), we can train ourselves in the art of understanding things adequately as well. Spinoza's example here concerns our understanding of the sun (2p35s).

While we may come to understand – with the help of modern science – that the sun is in reality very far from us, we will still perceive it to be near us because our bodies are affected by the heat that it radiates. This applies to many things we perceive daily. Even though modern physics tells us that no body is ever really motionless, we still perceive things to be motionless all the time. That is, an adequate understanding of something does not erase or replace an inadequate understanding of the same thing. It simply adds to it. This means



that while I perceive things around me (the things on my desk, for instance) inadequately insofar as I do not have access to the causal explanation of these things, I may complete this understanding by adding a more adequate form of understanding. I will always, however, perceive things by way of my imagination as well. At this point we may look closer at the three kinds of knowledge, starting with the imagination.

### **Spinoza's three kinds of knowledge**

When we understand things through our senses from haphazard encounters and experiences or when we form images via our imagination based on recollections or based on what others have told us, we tend to rely on our ability to form composite ideas so as to compensate for our inability to perceive the world in all its manifold complexity. Spinoza refers to these confused notions as universals. He argues that they are not adequate ideas since they make for a composite or mutilated image where many particular traits have been sacrificed so that we can fit many impressions neatly together into a unified image of what it is to be a man for instance. In 2p40s1 he writes that these universals

have arisen from similar causes, namely, because so many images (e.g., of men) are formed at one time in the human body that they surpass the power of imagining – not entirely, of course, but still to the point where the mind can imagine neither slight differences of the singular [men] (such as the color and size of each one, etc.) nor their determinate number, and imagines distinctly only what they all agree in, insofar as they affect the body.

Consequently, universals are understood to be “highly confused ideas . . . we form in our mind to compensate for the limitedness of our cognitive capacities” (Melamed 2013: 102). As such they tend to give rise to various prejudices because, as we have seen above, they cause us to expect particular things to conform to this limited and confused notion that we come up with when many different things are blended into one and the same. This, then, is an example of the first kind of knowledge or cognition<sup>2</sup> according to Spinoza's taxonomy of knowledge in 2p40s2. Spinoza labels this kind of knowledge opinion or imagination [*opinio vel imaginatio*]. The main problem with the first kind of knowledge is – as indicated in the example of the commonsensical understanding of my work space above – that I take my sensory responses to things outside of me to represent true information about the external world.

As indicated in the previous chapter, there are psychological and ethical benefits of coming to understand the affects better. When we see that many things that we feel threatened by are in fact not threatening in themselves, but that the feeling of threat is due to a misrepresentation of certain affections of the body, this understanding alone can offer considerable psychological relief. This way we can avoid a life of constant distress at the prospect of coming



across whatever we feel threatened by in our daily lives. As a result, our striving to persevere in being will be less impaired by external things, and this way we see quite clearly how increasing our understanding and being virtuous (i.e., empowered) amount to the same thing for Spinoza.

If our sensory impressions lead to an inadequate understanding of the world – and since we are, for all intents and purposes, necessarily limited by our perceptive abilities as finite modes – one might wonder how we can ever hope to arrive at anything but a severely mutilated understanding of the world. In particular, this raises questions as to how education can bypass this natural cognitive limitation on the part of humans qua finite modes. Since Spinoza does in fact claim that humans can, and do, form adequate ideas about the world, it seems important to outline a pedagogical scheme for facilitating this process. In order to be able to do this, however, we need to acquaint ourselves with the forming of adequate ideas.

Since causation is bound up with understanding, an adequate idea is quite simply an idea that we can explain by virtue of having knowledge of its causes. And we have knowledge of its causes because we have access to them by virtue of being the cause of these ideas ourselves. In more practical terms, this means that we do not have to travel beyond the reach of our bodies to gain the information we need. This obviously places a constraint on our ability to understand insofar as it appears to limit the kinds of things that we can understand adequately considerably. Since finite modes are bound up in infinite chains of causes, it seems that we cannot hope to arrive at an adequate understanding of particular things that we come across in the world. We can, however, arrive at this kind of understanding as long as the answers we are looking for are already within our reach.

The second kind of knowledge Spinoza refers to as reason [*ratio*]. The third kind he names intuitive knowledge [*scientia intuitiva*]. Both the second and third kind amount to adequate ideas. That is they yield ideas that are caused internally rather than externally. Reason – the second kind of knowledge – makes for a central aspect of a Spinozistic account of education insofar as it refers to the forming of adequate ideas based on what Spinoza calls common notions. Common notions are properties that all things share (by virtue of being expressed through the same attribute), and so by understanding this property in one thing we may understand it in another and so on. This way we may form adequate ideas of things that we generally tend to have only inadequate ideas of. Intuitive knowledge – being the third kind – is connected with understanding things from the perspective of God or Nature, and it is the way that Spinoza's free man understands things. As we will see, the third kind of knowledge is of less importance for an educational account insofar as it already assumes a fully rational being. Therefore it may be best to treat it as an ideal rather than a cornerstone of education. Let us therefore focus on understanding the second kind of knowledge before briefly acquainting ourselves with the third kind.

Extended bodies have certain things in common. For instance, all bodies share certain properties such as being extended, and being constrained by the



universal laws of motion and rest. Since this goes for all bodies, we may understand an external body – at least in part – by virtue of already having access to the kind of information we need insofar as we share certain defining features with all extended bodies. This way we can form adequate ideas to the degree that we identify commonalities between bodies and to the extent that we apply this way of understanding according to the order of the intellect when we encounter external bodies. As is evident from the example above, the second kind of knowledge hinges on our ability to interact with bodies so as to establish a pattern of understanding that derives from the identification of certain common properties. As Olli Koistinen explains:

Now, while the second kind of knowledge is also a source of adequacy, it is based on the actual existence of the body. The concepts involved in the second kind are both acquired through experience and require a durational body to have an application. One cannot think, for example, of the laws of motion without presenting to oneself moving bodies, and so once the durational body ceases to exist, the second kind of knowledge loses its significance.

(2014: 233)

While our ideas of finite modes are always – and by necessity – fragmented ideas, it seems they also contain these common properties by which we may form adequate ideas. This opens up a potential for education insofar as it means that it may not be pointless, after all, to investigate the world around us. As LeBuffe notes, from an epistemological point of view, “all of my sensory ideas are adequate at least insofar as they are ideas of common properties” (2014: 209). This means that inadequate ideas “may be in part adequate” because “[p]roperties that are omnipresent in body . . . will always be known to a mind in its encounters with other things” (2014: 209). By experiencing encounters with different things, we may form adequate ideas by coming to know common properties in different things (by virtue of having these properties ourselves), even though the full complexity of the thing we encounter is not within our grasp. This kind of knowledge, then, is bound up with embodied experience, and the more we experience, the more potential we have for forming adequate ideas based on common properties. As already mentioned, Spinoza links this kind of knowledge with common notions. Common notions, LeBuffe argues, “connect one of Spinoza’s strongest metaphysical claims, that there are properties that exist, in the strong sense of existence, and are omnipresent in the body, to a strong epistemological claim: we always have adequate knowledge of those properties” (2014: 208). One way of understanding reason, then, is in terms of “knowledge of what is omnipresent” (2014: 205).

As Sanem Soyarslan notes, Spinoza scholars have generally taken two different approaches to the interpretation of Spinoza’s distinction between reason and intuitive knowledge. While some take reason and intuitive knowledge to “differ only in terms of the process by which they are attained,” Soyarslan and



others maintain that the “two kinds of adequate knowledge differ not only with respect to their *method*, but also in terms of their representative *content*” (2013: 2). On this interpretation, it is argued that while “reason involves the universal knowledge of the properties of things, intuitive knowledge relates to the essences of things, and hence that adequate knowledge of the essences of things is limited to intuitive knowledge” (2013: 2). While I am sympathetic to Soyarslan’s interpretation of the distinction between reason and intuitive knowledge, where intuitive self-knowledge leads to a deeper form of self-understanding and self-empowerment, I believe that this kind of knowledge is largely beyond the scope of education in any wider sense. It will come to play a role insofar as it posits an ideal of sorts, but it may not be a realistic model as that would narrow down the potential of education, socially and politically, considerably. It is still useful to get a better understanding of how this ideal is conceived however.

While, as we have seen above, Spinoza understands reason in terms of knowledge based on “common notions and adequate ideas of properties of things” (2p40s2), he understands intuitive knowledge as a kind of knowing that “proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the [NS: formal] essence of things” (2p40s2). One way of grasping the difference between the two is to “suggest that reason is a ‘universal’ knowledge in that it is knowledge of the common properties of things, whereas intuitive knowledge is the knowledge of singular things since it relates to their essences” (Soyarslan 2013: 4). Intuitive knowledge, then, aims at grasping what reason cannot, namely adequate knowledge of the essence of finite things. Soyarslan argues that while we cannot adequately understand singular things as durational entities “insofar as our mind perceives them from the common order of nature” since “according to the common order of Nature, any singular thing implicates all other things to infinity” (Soyarslan 2013: 10), we can, potentially at least, understand things adequately by coming to understand “the very nature of their existence or the internal force by which they persevere in existence following from the eternal necessity of God’s nature” (Soyarslan 2013: 13). Put differently, while we cannot adequately understand a finite thing as it exists in space and time, we can come to understand the actual essence of that thing insofar as this essence is “a partial expression of God’s infinite and eternal essence” (Soyarslan 2013: 14).<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, in 2p47s Spinoza establishes that “since all things are in God and are conceived through God, it follows that we can deduce from this knowledge a great many things which we can know adequately, and so can form the third kind of knowledge . . .” As Soyarslan establishes, the difference between reason and intuitive knowledge comes down to a difference between “conceiving of a property that is represented by a common notion” and conceiving of something “as a particular power of existing” (2013: 16).

Soyarslan argues for the importance of intuitive self-knowledge as a foundational form of intuitive knowledge insofar as “the mind’s power of knowing other things via knowledge of the third kind depends on intuitive self-knowledge” (2013: 16). This is so because, as we have already established,



the human mind – being the idea of the body – can only ever know things by way of the human body and through its affective encounters with other bodies. Similarly, only insofar as we have adequate knowledge of our own essence can we attain adequate knowledge of the essence of other things. Since our own essence (our power of acting) is a particular expression of God's infinite essence, it follows that insofar as we know our own essence we also come to form adequate knowledge of God by understanding intuitively how we follow from God's power of acting. The benefits of intuitive self-knowledge, as perceived through Soyarslan's analysis, suggest that this knowledge will result in an enduring satisfaction of the mind, due to the recognition of the mind's power of understanding. In this sense it counteracts the frustrations resulting from inadequate knowledge insofar as it fully exploits the inherent power of the mind to grasp the essence of the body rather than attempting – and failing – to form knowledge that is beyond the capacities of a finite mind.

Admittedly, this kind of intuitive self-understanding is extremely difficult to attain, and so from a broader educational point of view, I believe it is best approached in terms of an ideal while knowing that very few will actually succeed in attaining it. Even though it is conceived as superior to reason to the extent that through it “one can gain greater control over her passive affects than reason alone would provide” (2013: 20) the more general goals of education, such as facilitating a rational understanding of the world so as to construe an ethical life in accordance with this understanding, are within the scope of reason. For this reason I will treat intuitive self-knowledge as an ideal, but I will treat reason as a necessary condition for education. In the remainder of this book we will therefore pay more attention to reason – and to the interplay between reason and imagination – than to intuitive self-knowledge as such. This is not because intuitive self-knowledge is deemed an undesirable goal for education, but simply because, as Soyarslan remarks, “[a]ttaining this state of mind is extremely difficult if not impossible” (2013: 20) and so it will not make for a realistic goal for most students. By focusing on attaining the second kind of knowledge and by seeking – as far as possible – to have all students live according to the commands of reason, the few who are predisposed toward intuitive self-knowledge will have an opportunity to pursue it without being held back by others. At the same time, those who are not predisposed toward intuitive self-knowledge will benefit from living according to the commands of reason and by the increased rationality of those who are. We will return to the notion that it is beneficial to surround oneself with people who are rational in the next chapter when we investigate the social aspects of Spinoza's ethics of self-preservation.

In what follows we will therefore look closer at the means by which we may acquire adequate knowledge through reason and how this knowledge relates to the ethical striving to persevere in being. It is argued that as we can never hope to replace all of our inadequate ideas with adequate ideas the gradual increase of our understanding hinges on our ability to reorder ideas. By reordering our ideas, we may separate ideas of affects from ideas of external causes so that we can



see more clearly how to become the adequate cause of some of our affects. By becoming the adequate cause of our affects we will become more active, and as we saw in the previous chapter, by becoming more active we will attain the only kind of freedom available to humans. This chapter will therefore culminate in a discussion on the deliberative potential of education, where a gradual existence – spanning from a life of passivity to a life of activity – is paralleled by a gradual freedom – from the bondage of the passive affects to the highest degree of freedom (available to humans) associated with attaining an adequate understanding of ourselves and the world. Taken together, the tacit educational credo of Spinoza’s epistemology tells us that to be educated is to exist more. What this means more specifically is something that we will turn to in what follows.

### **Ethics and education: Enhancing existence through the reordering of ideas**

Spinoza’s taxonomy of knowledge provides us with a valuable background against which we may draw up the principal aims and scope of an education serving to enhance the existence of the student. We may start out by establishing that because epistemology and ethics collapse into one and the same thing for Spinoza: education – insofar as education concerns enhancing the students’ understanding of themselves and the world – is simply a means by which students may become more virtuous (i.e., powerful). To become virtuous is therefore not primarily a matter of studying moral philosophy or of discussing ethics as a separate domain of knowledge, but of learning as much as we can about ourselves, our affects and the natural world in which we live. This is so as this will allow us a better understanding of what we benefit from, and since the striving to persevere in being is the only foundation of virtue (4p22c), what we benefit from is the same as what is ethical. In order to become more ethical, then, it is crucial to find out more about how to increase our degree of reality as we have seen that this corresponds with our degree of self-preservation and self-determination.

As we saw in Chapter One, Spinoza’s understanding of reality is that it is gradual. This means that a thing can be more or less real (i.e., more or less ontologically independent) depending on the extent to which it can cause things. To be able to cause more, then, is to exist more. Existence, understood in this sense, is therefore qualitative rather than quantitative insofar as to exist more is not tantamount to existing for a longer period of time, but rather to expressing a higher degree of reality qua perfection. This for Spinoza is an ethical concern since perfection is a virtue that equals a greater degree of understanding and since he “equates virtue with a joy that centres – even in its highest form – on the present” (Lloyd 1998: 157). Since being a cause of something – say an idea – means grasping the full causal history of that thing, we have also seen that increasing one’s degree of adequate understanding is instrumental for enhancing one’s existence. This, in turn, means that insofar as education is geared for increasing the degree of adequate understanding of the students, education is



about increasing their degree of existence. Hence, to be educated for Spinoza means, in a very real sense, to exist more in the here and now.

Since we are limited by our bodies insofar as we can only arrive at new ideas to the extent that we interact with external bodies, education may be taken to concern exposing the body to different encounters so that the mind may form new ideas as a result of these encounters. To simply expose ourselves to different encounters is, as we have seen, not nearly enough, however. This is what most of us tend to do anyway, and generally this does not mean that we acquire adequate knowledge of the world. Instead, this amounts to inadequate ideas insofar as we tend to adjust our perception of other bodies according to our own emotional responses. The trick, then, is to experience things and to, based on our ability to identify common properties in these experiences, form adequate ideas. As hinted at above, this requires a reordering of ideas where we disconnect ideas from the order of random experience and reconnect them according to the order of the intellect so as to transform inadequate ideas into adequate ideas.

As we saw above, common properties form the basis of adequate knowledge according to Spinoza's second kind of knowledge. They do so insofar as they may be grasped in terms of common notions. We always already have access to this kind of knowledge insofar as it hinges on properties we share by virtue of being extended and thinking things. This does not automatically mean, however, as Marshall notes, "that one is always fully conscious of those ideas, or that one will only ever use them correctly" (2013: 40). As Spinoza explains in 2p47s, people commonly misrepresent things that they have adequate knowledge of, and so he claims that "most errors consist only in our not rightly applying names to things." Spinoza goes on to say that "most controversies have arisen from this, that men do not rightly explain their own mind, or interpret the mind of the other man badly." Similarly, while humans have access to adequate knowledge of God by virtue of being expressions of the infinite power of God, this knowledge is seldom recognized (as it is distorted by an anthropomorphic image of God) and so "[p]art of Spinoza's program of rational self-improvement is to connect the term 'God' to that adequate idea of God in our minds" (Marshall 2013: 41). To understand God is to understand nature, and since we are modal expressions of God or Nature, we can do this by understanding ourselves and our affects. Hence, by reordering our ideas, we may arrive at a more adequate understanding of what causes us pain and what brings us joy.

To reorder ideas involves "breaking old associations between accidentally formed ideas and replacing them with *new* associations, ones forged according to the order of reason" (Marshall 2013: 187). This process of reordering ideas serves to transform inadequate ideas into adequate ideas by separating affects from thoughts of external causes. At this point it is useful to illustrate with an example: Suppose that you commute to and from work by train. Suppose that when the train is late, you become irritated because you know that you will most likely be late for work, and because when you are late for work, your workload will pile up and you will most likely have to put in some overtime. This chain of associations feeds into your irritation, and it may turn into anger



at the train (or at the driver of the train) for not being on time. This anger will then spill over onto the people you meet, and as they detect your hostility, thinking that it is directed against them, they will respond accordingly. This way, your understanding of the train delay will set you off on a path that will diminish your power of acting as it will afflict you with affects of sadness. All of this is due to the fact that you assume (for no good reason) that the train was delayed because somebody (perhaps the driver) did something wrong and that this wrong afflicted you even though you did not deserve it. If instead you endeavor to break this chain of associations by coming to see that the train delay is not caused by any one singular cause, but – being part of the order of nature – by an infinite chain of causes too far reaching for you to comprehend, then you will also see that it is useless to direct your anger at something that you have no influence over. Understanding this, you may recover from your anger, and you will not have to suffer its consequences any longer than is absolutely necessary.

By reordering ideas in this way, a person may identify actions prescribed by reason so that affects are disconnected from ideas of external causes and joined with other thoughts so that “the love, or hate, toward the external cause is destroyed, as are the vacillations of the mind arising from these affects” (5p2). In order to help us attain this difficult goal Spinoza stipulates dictates of reason that – if abided by – can help us focus on the task at hand (i.e., increasing our power of acting) rather than being distracted by the unpredictable fluctuations of our desires. These dictates of reason act as a kind of substitute for an adequate knowledge of our affects (5p10s). If we live by them, Spinoza argues that we will be guided by rational principles even when we do not fully understand the particularities of our affective changes. These dictates of reason, then, offer “a standard by which she [the individual human being] may evaluate objects or actions as good or evil” as well as a way by which we can “identify necessary connections between forms of action and power” making them into “instrumental rules for power enhancement” (Steinberg 2014: 179). Accordingly, in 5p10s Spinoza states that

[t]he best thing, then, that we can do, so long as we do not have perfect knowledge of our affects, is to conceive a correct principle of living, or sure maxims of life, to commit them to memory, and to apply them constantly to the particular cases frequently encountered in life. In this way our imagination will be extensively affected by them, and we shall always have them at hand.

Education offers an ideal setting for practicing and meditating on the dictates of reason in relation to situations that we frequently find ourselves in and that we struggle with often. Spinoza’s dictates of reason state, for example, that hate is conquered by love or nobility and that the person guided by reason therefore strives to repay hate with love (4p46; 4p46s). Spinoza suggests that we practice imagining how hatred frequently leads people astray and how this can be “warded off best by nobility” so as to “join the image of a wrong to the



imagination of this maxim” (5p10s) and by doing so preparing ourselves for adopting it whenever a wrong is actually done to us. Another dictate of reason concerns the benefits of joining with other people and of maintaining friendship (4p18s; 4p35s) for the sake of becoming more empowered in the striving to live by the guidance of reason and attaining satisfaction of the mind (4p52). Spinoza claims that if we attach the notion that hate should be repaid by love with this latter maxim as well as the principle that humans act from the necessity of nature, then “the wrong, *or* the hate usually arising from it, will occupy a very small part of the imagination, and will easily be overcome” (5p10s). The key for Spinoza is that these maxims for living well must be practiced frequently so that our imagination is conditioned to associate certain situations with certain mental responses. Therefore they constitute “general, simple, memorable teachings, and, as such, they can contribute vitally to the mental conditioning process that makes rational conduct possible” (Steinberg 2014: 192). In the context of education, one can easily conceive of ways of arranging opportunities for practicing this and for setting up an environment where the natural tendency to strive for self-preservation and self-determination is made the most of by utilizing the collective striving of the group.

In 5p10s Spinoza states that “[s]o long as we are not torn by affects contrary to our nature, we have the power of ordering and connecting the affections of the body according to the order of the intellect.” Being torn by affects contrary to our nature, for Spinoza, is roughly the same as suffering from mental illness.<sup>4</sup> This brings us back to the notion that a Spinozistic education is geared for combating mental illness and for promoting mental health. One of the most powerful tools available to us in this endeavor is our ability to reorder ideas so that ideas that are confused insofar as they distort our notion of what is good for us is turned into adequate ideas (i.e., ideas that clearly represent what we desire so that we may actively pursue and attain it).

Accordingly, one of the central tasks of education is to disrupt irrational fears and desires, and by promoting the reordering of ideas, reshaping the students’ conception of the good life so that they may pursue long-term happiness rather than the temporary pleasures advertised in their surroundings. An initial step toward achieving this, from the perspective of the teacher, may be to arrange for an environment where students are not torn by many powerful passive affects but where many of the temptations and threats of everyday life are kept at bay or approached in a structured and methodical way so that students may learn to break chains of associations that cause them to suffer. This is what Spinoza talks about in 5p4s where he encourages us to “take special care to know each affect clearly and distinctly” so that in this way “the affect itself may be separated from the thought of an external cause and joined to true thoughts.” To reiterate, this means that the cause of distress may be understood to be an inadequate concept of the good rather than the perceived inability to attain (and to hold on to) these goods. If this is so then it appears that child-centered and student-centered education faces a serious problem insofar as the teacher is encouraged to turn to the children or the students, asking them what it is that they want.



This is problematic insofar as the very aim of education is to figure out what we truly want and how we may best attain it. This cannot be known in advance because then we would need no education. This conclusion is also reached by Derry, arguing that “[t]o educate is to relocate ideas and this is different from what are termed child-centered approaches or traditional didactic approaches” (2009: 35). Conversely, catering to the whims of cultural desires and the temporary wants expressed by students would therefore mean hampering rather strengthening the self-mastery of the individual student. The progressive notion that education needs to be pleasurable and painless is therefore counterproductive insofar as it furthers a misconceived notion of the good so as to avoid the pain of having to reevaluate the objects of our desires.

Elsewhere, Derry (2006) approaches a similar problem from the point of view of a liberal understanding of the will as a simple reflection of what we want. This is helpful because it illustrates the intimate relationship between Spinoza’s notion of mental illness and various socially spread ills, such as greed or envy. To take an example, we may think that we want something – say, a substantial amount of money – because having had that thing in the past and at the same time being happy, we have been caused to associate that thing with being happy (confusing the external thing with an affection of our body). And so when, at a later time, we see someone we identify with having this thing, and us not being able to obtain it, our desire will be frustrated and it will turn into envy over this thing that we believe would help us feel better.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, we act contrary to reason by pursuing transient goods rather than long-term happiness, and believing falsely that true goods are in competition, we envy those who have access to the things we want but cannot obtain. This self-destructive behavior is then reinforced and enhanced in a social setting via commercials and other representations in media and popular opinion, where we are frequently encouraged to pursue transient goods in order to change for the better. One of the great threats to a viable ethical community that is displayed in this example is that the very thing that is our advantage – the fact that rational humans are alike in nature – can also spur destructive passive affects, such as envy and greed, when we misconstrue the cause of our happiness (3p32s). Coming to see that the things we think we want may not be the true cause of our happiness can therefore help us to keep these emotions in check by disconnecting the affects from ideas of external things. This way we may come to understand that many of our desires are socially and culturally constituted (and therefore beyond our control) and that we need to work on understanding what it is that we truly want (what we actually *do* control) and how to best pursue it. Derry explains how this is connected with misrepresenting social desires as the popular notion of a free will:

In our common sense conception, will presents itself to us as a capacity, a power vested within ourselves. This power (located in the soul according to Descartes) is set apart from the world of matter upon which we act, as an independent force. Coupled with this everyday common-sense conception of freedom is the idea that free will is the unencumbered pursuit of the



object of desire – “free to consume what I like.” Presupposed here is that what-I-am is what-I-desire (my identity is an outcome of my consumption patterns). There is little thought that desires may not be genuinely my own, i.e. not my own in the sense that they determine me externally.  
(2006: 115)

To come to see that these desires are externally rather than internally determined is part and parcel of the process of reordering ideas according to the order of the intellect. This brings us back to the affinity between Spinoza’s understanding of a true definition – making for a map of something’s making – and Vygotsky’s scientific concepts, as both of these notions hinge on the connection of ideas. Derry elaborates and relates the discussion to a salient critique of child-centered education:

For Spinoza it is the particular connection of one idea to another which constitutes its adequacy. Vygotsky appreciates this point, seeing that to educate involves the “relocation” of ideas. This is different both from what are termed child-centered approaches and traditional didactic approaches. The attempt to grow a higher understanding exclusively from children’s experiences fails as completely as attempts to implant a higher understanding without regard to these experiences. The former overestimates the child’s capacity to learn without teaching and the latter underestimates the conditions for learning.  
(2013: 96)

To understand what we want, then, emerges as a crucial aspect of education. Without a clear conception of what we are striving for, we are liable to end up pursuing things that will lead us astray or that will end up making us feel miserable as they will not have the lasting effect that we were hoping for. To be able to reach an adequate understanding of the good requires reconnecting our ideas and conditioning our cognitive patterns so that we may transform ideas of affects such as envy and hate into ideas of affects such as nobility and love. In gradually enhancing our understanding of the affects, education amounts to a cognitive training where we construe “pedagogy as a process of adjusting the connection of ideas already known but connected differently” which, as Derry notes, “is quite different from a familiar conception of pedagogy as an approach consisting of techniques and style” (2013: 96). The goal of this cognitive training is to increase our power of acting – which happens when we become the adequate cause of our ideas – and by increasing our power of acting we perfect ourselves, that is, we maximize our degree of reality.

Enhanced existence, then, comes out as the end result of a structured reordering of our ideas so that “they are no longer connected according to the order of random experience, but instead reflect the true causal order of things” (Soyarslan 2014: 245). Through education we may reorder ideas, and by doing this we may come to see the true value of things with regard to our striving for self-preservation. This way, education makes for one possible way out of



bondage, where bondage is understood in terms of a life guided by a confused notion of the good. Overcoming this confused notion is part and parcel of the painful process of becoming ethical. And so in order to liberate and empower ourselves vis-à-vis harmful passive affects, we need to be educated (among other things) so as to be able to “see our way past a constellation of inadequate or confused ideas about our own bodies and minds, which distort our appreciation of the good” (James 2014: 147). At this point I would like to return to Spinoza’s conception of human freedom in order to see how an increased rationality corresponds with an increased degree of self-determination.

### **Spinozistic freedom: To understand God is to understand yourself**

Absolute freedom is, as we have seen, reserved for God or Nature. Everything else is endeavoring to gradually increase in freedom insofar as the essence of finite modes is the striving to persevere and to flourish in being. This, for humans, requires adequate knowledge of the world so as to facilitate the recognition of the good. To understand the world (and all the things in the world) adequately is to understand it the way God understands it: as necessarily determined to exist and to act in a certain way. Since God and Nature amount to the same thing for Spinoza, a more adequate understanding of nature equals a more adequate understanding of God. Hence, Spinoza concludes that “the greatest virtue of the mind is to understand, *or* know, God, q.e.d.” (4p28d).

What, more precisely, does it mean to understand God? For Spinoza, humans, being modes of God, always already have access to adequate knowledge of God. Since a human being has an intuitive understanding of what it is to be extended (by virtue of being a body) and of what it is to be a thinking thing (by virtue of being a mind), it follows that “every human mind necessarily has an idea of God’s essence, as conceived under those two attributes” (Marshall 2013: 37). Understanding oneself – as an extended or thinking thing – means understanding oneself as an expression of an attribute of God. Therefore, as Spinoza explains,

singular things (by 1p15) cannot be conceived without God – on the contrary, because (by p6) they have God for a cause insofar as he is considered under the attribute of which the things are modes, their ideas must involve the concept of their attribute (by 1a4), that is (by 1d6), must involve an eternal and infinite essence of God, q.e.d.

(2p45d)

How, then, does this understanding of God relate to the concept of human freedom? To simply have access to a common notion about what it is to be extended does not necessarily mean that I am aware of this understanding.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the fact that I perceive intuitively that I am an extended thing, and therefore have something in common with other extended things (through which I may come to understand myself better), does not in itself mean that I let this understanding



guide my actions. As we have seen, the path to freedom, for Spinoza, is intimately connected with acting on one's adequate knowledge insofar as freedom is the same as living a life *guided* by reason. That is, by understanding something adequately this understanding can be made into a guiding principle of a way of life that is self-determined rather than determined by external causes. As we have seen, a human being is always externally determined to some degree – since we rely on things around us for our very survival – and so self-determination is necessarily gradual. The more we know about the world, the more self-determined we become. From this it follows that freedom, as Nadler notes, “is all a matter of whether a person does what he does because of what he knows or because of how he is made to feel by external things” (2015: 107).

Education, then, may be seen to be promoting a way of life that is guided by dictates of reason acting as a compensation for the limited human cognition preventing us from understanding ourselves as modal expressions of the infinite essence of God. On a practical level, this means that we may take advantage of the fact that we always already have access to adequate knowledge of ourselves (by virtue of the common notions) and of God (by virtue of being modal expressions of God), in order to train ourselves cognitively to act in accordance with this understanding. The more we learn to do this – by practicing it frequently – the more self-determined and liberated from the opinions of others we become. In this way, there is a direct link between gaining adequate knowledge and our degree of self-determination. When we act on inadequate knowledge, we tend to follow our passive responses to things that happen, and we tend to be in bondage insofar as we are determined to follow the opinions of others. We still strive to persevere in being, but misconstruing the object of our happiness, we may fall prey to greed (thinking that more money will make us happier), and so we will end up enslaved by the things around us. Conversely, when we are guided by reason, we will see that our ticket out of bondage is an increased understanding of ourselves as this understanding may help us to abstain from excessively pursuing transient goods and that it can fortify us against the harmful opinions of others. The difference between freedom and bondage comes down to a difference between a life lived according to adequate ideas and a life guided by inadequate ideas. Since this difference is gradual, it introduces a kind of educational ideal insofar as education may provide the instrument by which we can successfully transform ourselves from a life in bondage to a life in freedom. Spinoza comments on the connection between ignorance/bondage and understanding/freedom in 4p66s:

[W]e shall easily see what the difference is between a man who is led only by an affect, *or* by opinion, and one who is led by reason. For the former, whether he will or not, does those things he is most ignorant of, whereas the latter complies with no one's wishes but his own, and does only those things he knows to be most important in life, and therefore desires very greatly. Hence, I call the former a slave, but the latter, a free man.



The path to freedom is not painless, and the transition from bondage to freedom not an easy one to make. It requires a lot of a person to be able to resist the urge to follow one's passive responses. Because of this, a central feature of the remainder of this book will concern precisely this. That is, it will concern investigating education as a way of perfecting the art of making intelligent choices, where an intelligent choice is not conceived in terms of freedom from constraint, but rather in terms of an action accompanied by an awareness of the necessary constraints in nature. We will continue to discuss this in Chapter Four in relation to the role of the passive affects in education, and we will continue discussing it in Chapters Five and Six when outlining, in more detail, the therapeutic aspects of a Spinozistic account of education as well as the important question of teaching and authority.

What I want to stress for now is that adequate knowledge is not something we acquire from the external world and that we can somehow learn to internalize by way of simply studying the things around us. Adequate knowledge is always already within our grasp. By virtue of being extended things, we have access to adequate knowledge of what constitutes a body, and by virtue of being thinking things, we have access to adequate knowledge of what constitutes a mind. As we have seen, Spinoza discusses this kind of knowledge in terms of common notions, and common notions offer us a conceptual bridge between understanding ourselves and understanding other (extended or thinking) things in the world. Because we are modal expressions of substance, we also have access to an intuitive knowledge of God (and via God, of ourselves) insofar as we are God expressed through extension and God expressed through thought. To know God for Spinoza is therefore not an esoteric kind of knowing directed at understanding something above or beyond this world. Instead, understanding God is simply to understand myself as a modal expression of an attribute of God. This is important because it means that everyone has access to an adequate knowledge of God simply by virtue of being a modal expression. Rather than getting lost in an infinite maze of causal connections, the knowledge of the attributes (that we have access to by virtue of being expressed through them) take us directly to their cause (i.e., God) without having to understand how each thing has come into durational existence. Marshall explains that "in having any idea whatsoever, my mind thereby has an idea of an attribute, which is just a conception of the divine essence" and so that "when I conceive of the divine essence, I also conceive of the cause of the divine essence, since God is a cause *per se*" (2013: 38–39).

This is not enough to be liberated, however, since the fact that we have access to this understanding does not automatically mean that we are aware of or follow this understanding as a guiding principle in our daily lives. This then introduces an important challenge in the setting of a Spinozistic education (i.e., to have students embark on a gradual journey from responding to things passively to becoming aware of [and thereby acting on] the adequate ideas that they already have access to). The challenge is to become aware of ideas that are "latent in the mind, yet innate, until I have some experience that triggers my mind's production of these ideas" (2013: 53). In a nutshell, then, this transition



whereby we trigger the production of ideas that are latent in our mind is one that leads from bondage to freedom.

### **To be educated is to be liberated**

To sum things up so far: to be educated is to exist more insofar as a person's degree of existence corresponds with his or her ability to understand things adequately. Simply put, the more we understand adequately, the more we exist. Since understanding things adequately, for Spinoza, is instrumental for living ethically – as a good life is tantamount to acquiring a greater power of acting – it follows that the aims of education and ethics coincide in the quest for a better understanding of the world. In achieving a better understanding of the world – one that is not tainted by superstitions but that aims at grasping things by way of their common properties – students may gain a greater power of acting insofar as they increase the amount of ideas of which they are the adequate causes. The more ideas we cause, the more liberated we become. We become liberated, not in the sense that we are exempt from the common laws of nature, but in the sense that we gain a better understanding of what we desire and how we can live in accordance with this rational desire. This means that “the more we are able to see the world as it truly is, the more we are able to be our own masters” (Koistinen 2014: 232). Self-mastery, then, amounts to a kind of mental freedom – and not a freedom from causal restraint – which Spinoza equates with having a healthy mind (Wienpahl 1972). Deliberation through education therefore goes hand in hand with the promotion of mental health through self-determination.

The flipside of this coin is that mental sickness is the enemy of education and the root of all human bondage. As we have seen in this chapter, mental sickness comes in the guise of ignorance, causing people to pursue unsustainable goods, such as temporary pleasures that give rise to other forms of mental sickness, such as greed, envy and hate. These ills are contagious, and they spread through popular imagery and public opinion. The only viable cure to these diseases is knowledge (which thankfully, as we will come to see in Chapter Five, is also contagious). By increasing our understanding of the affects we may come to distinguish between true goods and seemingly true goods (i.e., things that empower us and things that do not) and learn to make intelligent choices in the light of this knowledge. Since this is a painful and slow process, many of us need help, and so Spinoza's dictates of reason can help us strive for the good even when we have trouble recognizing it. These dictates of reason offer rational guidelines connecting ideas of things that will increase our power of acting with an understanding of which actions are truly empowering. Steinberg explains:

Reason can guide deliberation and action in a couple of ways: (1) one can grasp through reason that her essence consists in striving to realize as fully as possible her power of acting [*potentia agenda*]. This gives one a standard by which one may evaluate objects or actions as good or evil; (2) reason can identify necessary connections between forms of action and power.



Dictates are typically understood as action guiding in this second sense: they are instrumental rules for power enhancement.

(2014: 179)

For the dictates of reason to be made effective, however, a person needs to be guided by a knowledgeable teacher who can subject him or her to different situations (under safe conditions) where he or she may develop his or her judgment by practicing on applying them frequently so as to gradually increase his or her power of acting vis-à-vis passive affects. The measure of a well-educated person is therefore his or her degree of self-determination. Since a person's degree of self-determination is conditioned by the fact that humans are always externally determined to some degree, however, it is important to investigate how education can make use of this passivity when we continue to flesh out a Spinozistic account of deliberative education. Furthermore, if, as Genevieve Lloyd suggests, “[f]ictions facilitate reason’s transformation of inadequate ideas” (1998: 164) then it seems that the imagination may play an important role for the reordering of ideas in an educational context. Before delving into this in Chapter Four it is called for to first investigate how Spinoza’s psychological egoism constrains education. In particular, this concerns looking closer at the relation between the teacher and the student and at the relation between the individual and the collective. This makes for the point of departure for Chapter Three.

Before doing so, let us first briefly summarize what we have seen so far in this chapter. This chapter has concluded that an educational account informed by Spinoza’s ethics is geared to increasing the rational understanding of the student. Accordingly, we have established that it is ethical to gain more adequate knowledge about the world. Since the knowledge we access through our sensory perception of other finite modes is necessarily limited and confused – because they are always a mixture of an image of an external thing with our own affective response to that thing – it is a goal of education to, by way of the common properties of finite modes, have students reorder the ideas of the mind so that they correspond with the order of the intellect. This enables the student to make intelligent choices rather than being guided by confused ideas when striving to persevere in being.

This amounts to an education geared to the promotion of mental health – by reordering ideas – and to the combating of mental illness (i.e., confused ideas about the good, resulting in the spreading of social ills such as ignorance, hatred, greed, envy and superstition). By reordering ideas of the mind, students can become adequate causes of their ideas, and the more ideas they cause, the more they exist. This hinges on the notion that existence is gradual, and so the aim of education from a Spinozistic point of view is to enhance the degree of reality of the student. Enhancing one’s existence, for Spinoza, is a deliberative process since the more ideas a person is the adequate cause of, the more self-determined that person becomes. It follows that education, in aiming at increasing the degree of adequate ideas in the student, is at the same time



aiming at maximizing the freedom of the student vis-à-vis external causes. Because freedom is conditioned by the enhancement of the student's understanding, all of education, from a Spinozistic point of view, may be approached in terms of a form of moral education. Moral education, then, is not conceived as a part or an aspect of education. Instead, all of education is subordinated to the overarching goal of facilitating the ethical development of the student. This corresponds well with the fact that "for Spinoza there is an intrinsic relationship between the pursuit of knowledge and the pursuit of the good life" (Soyarslan 2013: 1). As we will see in the next chapter, however, the ethical development of the student is always conditioned by the ethical development of the teacher as well as the overall state of the greater ethical community.

## Notes

- 1 The primacy of causal explanations for Spinoza connects with his reliance on the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR). Della Rocca defines this as the principle "according to which, for each thing (object, state of affairs, or whatever) that exists or obtains, there is an explanation of its existence, there is a reason that it exists" (2010: 1).
- 2 Following Bennett (1984) and Garrett (2010), Melamed prefers to translate *cognitio* as cognition rather than knowledge "since for Spinoza *cognitio* may well be inadequate and false" (2013c: 100). I will, however, adopt the term *knowledge* in what follows so as to avoid confusion when citing Curley's standard translation of Spinoza.
- 3 The notion that we can form adequate knowledge of finite modes hinges on the assumption that finite modes may be grasped from two different perspectives (see 5p29s for Spinoza's explication of this distinction). On the one hand, a thing may be grasped as existing in duration, in which case it is caused by another finite mode and so on to infinity. When we seek to understand a thing as existing in duration, we are, as we have seen, doomed to fail. On the other hand, a finite mode may be grasped in terms of its essence, in which case it is caused by an attribute of God. Being an expression of this attribute ourselves, we already have access to the knowledge we need, and so when we approach our body in terms of its essence, we may actually know it adequately. For an extended discussion on finite modes as existing in duration or as its essence is in God, see Marshall (2013: 43–45).
- 4 A good example of this would be the problem of *akrasia*, or weakness of the will, where we recognize what is best for us but in spite of this follow the worse. This, for Spinoza, may be explained by the fact that a more powerful passive affect has conquered a weaker one. Where the weaker passive affect would have increased our power of acting, the more powerful passive affect leads us instead into bondage. For a fuller account of *akrasia* in Spinoza see Marshall (2010).
- 5 This behavior is explained by Spinoza's doctrine of the imitation of the affects discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.
- 6 I am generally sympathetic to Marshall's recent attempt to explain consciousness in Spinoza by way of affectivity. For ideas to become conscious is, on this account, for them to become affects, where affectivity is "construed as the property of an idea causally related to the mind in such a way as to increase, decrease, fix, or move the conatus of the mind to act" (2013: 124). I believe, along with Marshall, that this helps explain how more complex minds can attain a degree of consciousness (as well as self-consciousness) that simpler minds cannot (without having to deny them all aspects of consciousness). Moreover, in asserting a strong link between consciousness and the striving to persevere in being it places awareness at the center of Spinoza's ethical therapy in a way that accords well with my conception of education from a Spinozistic point of view.



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### 3 Self-preservation as an educational ideal

This chapter aims to connect Spinoza's moral theory – labeled his ethics of self-preservation – with educational theory. It is argued that this opens up for an intriguing line of thought where Spinoza's particular brand of psychological egoism can be conceived as a credible foundation for education insofar as the individual human being and the larger social and political body (of which the individual human being is an integrated part) are united in a common striving for self-preservation. This understanding of education as a project aimed at the increased self-preservation and self-empowerment of the teacher and the student makes education into a form of moral education from a Spinozistic perspective. The chapter also confronts some relevant concerns regarding Spinoza's denial of moral responsibility and how this can be reconciled with a credible moral theory, and in extension, with a credible account of education. In doing so it positions a Spinozistic account of education in relation to two other prominent and influential accounts; namely those of Aristotelian character education and a care ethical approach to education. This allows us to get a better sense of some of the ways that these accounts differ from a Spinozistic account, but it also serves to identify some striking similarities so as to highlight the distinctive characteristics of a Spinozistic conception of education.

#### **Self-preservation as the foundation of virtue**

The previous chapter concluded by affirming the strong link between becoming educated and becoming ethical. To this end, it was argued that a reasonable way of perceiving of education from a Spinozistic point of view is to approach education in terms of moral education. This means that the reason why we should gain more knowledge about ourselves and the world is so that we may become more ethical. Correspondingly, to become ethical is equivalent to gaining a more adequate understanding of the world. And so, Hegel's famous remark that "[e]ducation [*Pädagogik*] is the art of making human beings ethical" (1991: 195) is indeed fitting for capturing the essence of a Spinozistic conception of education. In this chapter we will develop this argument by looking closer at how Spinoza's moral theory – outlined in Chapter One – constrains education



insofar as education is commonly taken to describe a collective process of transformation. This involves looking closer at the seeming tension between Spinoza's ethics of self-preservation – being grounded in psychological egoism – and the educational ideal of collective flourishing.

In 4p22c Spinoza establishes that “[t]he striving to preserve oneself is the first and only foundation of virtue.” This seems to posit ethics as a thoroughly egoistic project geared to identifying and pursuing those things that will benefit self-preservation, regardless of how this will affect anyone else. To assume this would be a mistake however. In fact, one of the fascinating things about Spinoza's moral theory is the tight interplay between psychological egoism and collective flourishing. A good place to start investigating this interplay is in 4p18s, where Spinoza writes:

For if, for example, two individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one. To man, then, there is nothing more useful than man. Man, I say, can wish for nothing more helpful than that all should so agree in all things that the minds and bodies of all would compose, as it were, one mind and one body; that all should strive together, as far as they can, to preserve their being; and that all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of all.

For two individuals to be of the same nature in this way means that they strive for, and benefit from, the same things. Even though all people “act always on account of an end, namely, on account of their advantage, which they want” (1app), this, as we have seen, does not mean that all people recognize what is advantageous for them. Accordingly, it is only when they recognize this that they can strive for the same thing, and in doing so strengthen one another in this joint endeavor. In the case of human beings, for two people to share the same nature therefore assumes that they are guided by reason in which case they will strive for the same things, knowing that these things will actively contribute to their increased power of acting.

How is it, then, that my striving for an increased power of acting is benefited by someone else's striving for the same thing? To answer this, we must recall the central place of power within Spinoza's metaphysical system. Recall that the essence of all life is the striving to persevere in being. Finite things strive to do this at the same time. When finite things join up, they become more powerful insofar as weaker expressions of power are merged together into a stronger expression of power. This way they can better withstand external forces as they are less likely to be overpowered by them. In the case of a person guided by reason, this means that my own striving for an increased understanding is benefited from the increasing understanding of others as this will lead to a common striving (which will amount to a striving of a much greater force) rather than a futile struggle over goods that we falsely believe to be finite and therefore in competition.



Hence, Spinoza concludes that “the good which everyone who seeks virtue wants for himself, he also desires for other men” (4p37d).<sup>1</sup> This hinges on the assumption on Spinoza’s part that “[t]he greatest good of those who seek virtue is common to all, and can be enjoyed by all equally” (4p36). The fact the true goods can be enjoyed by all in equal measure is important as it offers a rational way out of the misconception that for some to benefit from something, someone else needs to sacrifice something. This would be deeply problematic as it rests on the false assumption that “true goods are in competition” (Kisner 2011: 212), whereas for Spinoza, true goods, such as an adequate understanding of the world, cannot be conceived in terms of a fixed quantity to be rationed out. Indeed, as we have just seen, the more rational people we join up with in our striving for the true good, the more powerful we will become, and the more we may each enjoy it.

It follows from the above that “[a] thing that shares my nature must, like anything, strive to preserve its own nature; and because its own nature is like my nature, it is therefore necessarily striving to preserve *my* nature” (Nadler 2014: 49). Remember that finite modes, such as individual humans, are always – at least partially – determined by their relations with other finite modes upon whom a person depends for his or her survival and general well-being. This means that since a human being is neither self-caused nor self-sustaining, but is constituted by relations with other finite modes, a person benefits from being around other humans who are alike in nature, making a person joyful rather than sad, and empowered (self-determined) rather than disempowered (externally determined). This way, humans can help each other in their common striving for perseverance, and they can gain in strength by joining forces with others.

We see then how the egoistic striving to persevere in being is conditioned by a flourishing community where people join together so as to strengthen one another in this striving. While self-preservation is the only foundation of virtue, self-preservation involves helping others become more rational. The more rational people around me become, the more they can help me become more rational in turn. Being selfish, then, does not in any way preclude helping others. Quite the opposite, Spinoza in fact claims that helping others is a necessary precondition for helping oneself. As Garrett explains, Spinoza “need not deny the *phenomena* of altruism. He is committed only to the view that the causal *origins* of these phenomena always lie in a single psychological force, which is the individual’s own endeavor for his or her own self-preservation” (1996: 303). Or put differently, what may appear to be an altogether altruistic or selfless act is always and by necessity grounded in the fundamentally egoistic striving to persevere in being according to Spinoza. The person acting may not be aware of this, however, and so thinking that the act is completely selfless, he or she will suffer from a misconceived notion of the good, believing this to be something other than the increased understanding that will facilitate a successful striving for self-preservation and empowerment.



In Part Three of the *Ethics* Spinoza defines benevolence as “a desire to benefit one whom we pity” (3DOE 35). Pity, for Spinoza is defined as a form of sadness “accompanied by the idea of an evil which has happened to another whom we imagine to be like us” (3DOE 18). There is another sense in which Spinoza talks about benevolence, however, as a desire to help others that springs from our rational striving to persevere in being rather than from pity.<sup>2</sup> This latter conception of benevolence is clearly the kind that concerns us here since it makes for a kind of benevolence that is perfectly compatible with the egoistic striving to persevere in being. The link between the egoistic striving for self-preservation and the flourishing of the greater community may therefore be identified as this rational form of benevolence whereby a person can be empowered through aiding others in their striving.

Education emerges as a forceful means by which many people can be joined together in their striving to persevere in being. This joint striving is always, as we have just seen, grounded in the egoistic striving of the individual. Before looking closer at how this affects the relation between the teacher and the student, we need to look closer at Spinoza’s mechanistic understanding of the interaction of bodies and of the composition of individuals as this helps explain why my striving to persevere in being is aided by my joining with others who are striving for the same thing. This also goes to establish how education, being a collective endeavor geared at safeguarding and transforming society, can be credibly founded on the egoistic striving of the individual.

### **The individual and society: On the relative complexity of bodies**

As we have just seen, for Spinoza, every process of social and inter-personal change needs to start with the self.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, education starts with self-education, therapy with self-therapy and empowerment with self-empowerment. The human self, however, is inevitably constituted in relation to other people and other things, dependent as it is on external things such as food, shelter and friendship for its very sustenance and survival. Likewise, self-education can only be successfully enacted in a social setting where one can be strengthened by other people striving for the same thing. A good way of approaching the relation between the individual human and the larger social community is by way of Spinoza’s concept of the body.

The body, as we saw in Chapter One, is understood as a collection of extended parts (or simpler bodies) that sustain a stable relation of motion and rest among one another. As Lloyd points out, this means that the human body is “a union of parts acting as a centre of communicating and communicated motion” where “each individual exerts a causal force on others, and each is in turn constantly impinged on by others” (1998: 160). Even at the level of individual human bodies, then, there are “overtones of unavoidable sociability” (1998: 160). The individual human body, in turn, may also be conceived as part



of a greater body, that of the community, which functions like a very complex body where the smaller parts – the individual human bodies – sustain a ratio of motion and rest and where each part is united in a common striving for self-preservation and empowerment. This means that the individual parts are organized in such a way as to bring about effects resulting from their unified effort. Spinoza explains this mechanism as follows:

When a number of bodies, whether of the same or of different size, are so constrained by other bodies that they lie upon one another, or if they so move, whether with the same degree or different degrees of speed, that they communicate their motions to each other in a certain fixed manner, we shall say that those bodies are united with one another and that they all together compose one body *or* individual, which is distinguished from the others by this union of bodies.

(D after 2a2’)

The normative upshot of this union of bodies is precisely the common striving for self-preservation forming the hotbed of a community guided by reason. As bodies join with other bodies, the power and striving to persevere of each is multiplied, and so the relatively weaker power of one becomes exponentially more powerful the more bodies (guided by the same striving for an increased understanding) it joins.

In the previous chapter we saw that embodied experience, for Spinoza, is very important from an epistemological point of view. The body’s interactions with the world provide the mind with crucial information about the body that it would otherwise have no access to since the body and the mind cannot interact causally. Accordingly, Spinoza maintains that “[t]he human mind does not know the human body itself, nor does it know that it exists, except through ideas of affections by which the body is affected” (2p19). This, as we have seen, means that if we are to gain a better understanding about ourselves (so as to learn what it is that will empower rather than weaken us) we have to rely on the information we gain by interacting with external bodies as this provides us with knowledge about ourselves and our affective capabilities that we cannot gain in any other way.

What is remarkable about this account is that it clearly highlights the centrality of the affective abilities of a body. Recall the parallelism doctrine discussed in Chapter One. For every body (however simple) there is always a corresponding idea. The more parts a body is composed of, the more ideas are in its mind. Spinoza furthermore asserts that a complex body has the ability to affect and be affected in many different ways. The more a body can be affected by and affect other bodies, the more knowledge its corresponding mind may gain about itself and the world by virtue of being affected by many ideas and being able to perceive many different things (2p14). Correspondingly, the more knowledge the mind gains access to, the more it can understand the complex causal network of which it is an integrated part and the more empowered and self-determined



it and the corresponding body may become. The intimate connection between the affective abilities of physical bodies and the ethical development of a person or a community, as indicated in this scheme, is very original and it will come to have important implications for the relation between education and embodied experience as we will see in Chapter Four. As Lloyd observes:

The idea of virtue as residing in increased power of reason is of course neither novel in itself nor surprising in a seventeenth-century philosopher so strongly associated with rationalism. What is more unusual – and perhaps more surprising – is the firm grounding of this rationalist ideal in the strengthening of bodily powers.

(1998: 157)

Spinoza posits three kinds of differently composed individuals, ranging from the first and simplest kind where the parts are “distinguished from one another only by motion and rest, speed and slowness” to the second and more complex kind that is “composed of a number of individuals of a different nature” (217s). Besides these two kinds, all of nature may be approached in terms of one giant body, functioning in a mechanistic way that corresponds to its simplest part, by sustaining a stable ratio of motion and rest. Spinoza describes this as the third and most complex form of composite individual:

But if we should further conceive a third kind of individual, composed [NS: of many individuals] of this second kind, we shall find that it can be affected in many other ways, without any change of its form. And if we proceed in this way to infinity, we shall easily conceive that the whole of nature is one individual, whose parts, that is, all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without any change of the whole individual.

(217s)

Spinoza’s naturalism thereby posits varying complex bodies made up of the same basic relations of motion and rest. If we understand the workings of a relatively simple body, we therefore have the key to understanding a more complex one. Since everything, for Spinoza, is a matter of varying complex bodies interacting in different ways, this means that if we can come to see how the human body is constrained and governed by the laws of nature, we will also see how the greater human community is constrained and governed in much the same ways. Accordingly, the underlying affinity between different bodies of varying complexity provides a key for understanding the correspondence between Spinoza’s understanding of a human being and his understanding of a state. As Michael A. Rosenthal notes: “It is not just that we are always in some form of a stable pattern of macro-relations with our fellow humans, we are also composed of parts whose micro-relations can be described in social terms” (2014: 100). That is, the way Spinoza approaches the political construction of



the state corresponds well with the way he describes the composition of the individual human. The individual, for Spinoza, functions much like a political mechanism. Rosenthal explains:

For the constitution and maintenance of an individual is political; it is indeed the very same problem as the constitution of a state, which requires the establishment of sovereignty, the decree of laws that serve as regulatory principles and methods of coordination of action.

(2014: 99)

This affinity between the individual human being and the larger political community is key for resolving the apparent tension between Spinoza's psychological egoism and education as a socio-political enterprise. Because the state – like a human being – is nothing above or beyond a collection of extended and thinking parts, Spinoza holds that the same ethical principles apply on the level of the state as on the level of individual humans. A good state is a state that recognizes its nature as a collection of body/mind-parcels thriving on preserving and enhancing its perfection and that therefore corresponds to the nature of its parts (i.e., the individual human beings). On a more practical level, since preserving and enhancing our perfection is intimately connected with increasing our activity, and since increasing our activity hinges on our ability to be guided by rational ideas, the potential of the individual human being is always conditioned by the limits of the state. As Kisner points out, this means that “developing and exercising our rationality depends upon material conditions, including political conditions, such as a state that promotes the free exchange of ideas” (2011: 5).

In the *Theological-Political Treatise* (and in 4p37s2) Spinoza concludes that if all humans were equally guided by a rational understanding of themselves and the external world, the regulatory state apparatus (the legal system, the military, law enforcement, etc.) would in fact turn out to be superfluous. This would be so since the regulatory function of the state, in Spinoza's view, exists precisely to compensate for the human tendency to let passive affects rather than reason guide the striving for self-preservation as discussed in the previous chapter. Spinoza explains:

Now if human beings were so constituted by nature that they desired nothing but what true reason points them to, society would surely need no laws; men would only need to learn true moral doctrine, in order to do what is truly useful of their own accord with upright and free mind.

(*TTP*, Ch. 5.8/I: 72)

However, as Spinoza points out immediately following this:

But they are not so constituted, far from it. All men do indeed seek their own interest, but it is not from the dictate of sound reason; for the most part they pursue things and judge them to be in their interest merely because



they are carried away by sensual desire and by their passions (which have no regard for the future and for other things). This is why no society can subsist without government and compulsion, and hence laws, which moderate and restrain desires.

(*TTP*, Ch. 5.8/I: 72–73)

For the same reason that a stable society needs government and laws to ensure the safety and well-being of its citizens, a person needs moral maxims to help guide the understanding so that harmful affects are kept in check and so that the different parts of the individual can sustain a stable ratio of motion and rest. To this end, Spinoza parallels the governing of the state with the governing of the individual person. Both individuals – the state as well as the person – strive to function as a forceful unity (by virtue of their essence) so that their power of acting is maximized. For this to happen, however, there needs to be a clear understanding of the causes in the changes in perfection so that the individual person – and the state of which it is a part – can anticipate and work actively toward changes for the better. Rosenthal suggests a further parallelism in the governing of the person and the governing of the state. He likens the sovereign to the will, making each into a single locus of power through which the different motions of all of the constituent parts of the body are being directed and orchestrated. He writes:

Like the sovereign, who decrees a law but who depends on the concerted action of all its subjects to enact it in practice, the will appears to express a singular action, but it actually expresses the united action of the multiple discrete individual things that constitute the parts of the whole through the regular communication of motion to one another.

(2014: 97)

When the will and the sovereign are guided by rational principles (i.e., by the striving to adequately understand the causes of the affects and to thereby become more self-determined and empowered vis-à-vis external causes) they act virtuously. They do so insofar as virtue, for Spinoza, equals power (4D8). It is the striving for increasing the power of acting that guides the rational person as well as the rational community. These two striving things in fact collapse into one for Spinoza. Since, as we have seen, the truly rational community is made up of many rational individuals, much like different body parts compose the complex individual of the human body, what is good for one is automatically good for the other. In this sense, an education that is focused on maximizing the power of acting of an individual human is at the same time an education that is focused on maximizing the power of acting of the larger community of which the individual human is but one of the constituent parts. This leads us to the normative upshot of Spinoza's conception of a body as a collection of parts sustaining a ratio of motion and rest – the notion that education grasped from the point of view of Spinoza's ethics of self-preservation concerns a concerted striving, making many individuals strive collectively for increased self-preservation and empowerment.



The analogy of the will and the sovereign also provides a useful image for understanding the role of the teacher in the classroom. This is so insofar as the role of the teacher may be conceived in terms of the locus of power in the classroom, directing and orchestrating all the different actions of the students so that they concur in one action together and in doing so express a single united will. The class – comprised by the students and the teacher – would therefore ideally comprise one body, in a kind of miniature version of the ideal state, where many discrete individuals strive to persevere in being under the guidance of the teacher – making the teacher into the classroom version of the sovereign. We will pick up and deepen the discussion on the role of the teacher vis-à-vis the role of the state in Chapter Six. Before looking closer at the relationship between the teacher and the student in this chapter, however, we should first conclude our understanding of the role of the community guided by reason for the successful self-preservation of the individual.

### **A common striving for self-preservation and empowerment**

We know that seeking to persevere in being is intimately connected with increasing one's understanding of oneself and the world. Increasing one's degree of understanding, in turn, is best conceived as a process of forming adequate ideas of one's affects. As we have just seen, however, this process is not an entirely individual affair but as Susan James points out, increasing one's understanding is

at least in part a social and political process of learning how to empower the body. For individuals, this is to some extent a matter of creating nourishing relationships with other people and things; but since many such relationships are ones over which we do not exercise individual control, understanding is inevitably a collective project of creating communities whose members mutually and reliably secure for one another the conditions they need in order to live well.

(2014: 155)

This sets up an educational ideal where a central goal of education is to facilitate the creation and sustaining of a rational community where a rational community is understood in terms of a community enabling the free exchange of ideas (in part, by making sure that irrational people cannot interfere with the affairs of rational people). Because, as we have just seen, the rational community is mirrored by the rational person, the way of going about this is to help the individual student become a more rational person. Spinoza's psychological egoism dictates that since everyone – by virtue of their essence – inevitably strives to persevere in being, helping the student become more rational is being motivated by self-preservation on the part of the teacher. Consequently, education from a Spinozistic point of view is at once a fundamentally egoistic and a collective socio-political enterprise, where egoism is conditioned by the fact



that self-preservation hinges on being in a rational community. Correspondingly, striving collectively is always, at bottom, rooted in the egoistic striving to increase one's degree of understanding and power of acting. This is explained by Spinoza's mechanistic understanding of a body, where, as we have just seen, a human being is an individual in its own right (composed by many interacting parts) and at the same time, a single part of a greater body (functioning in much the same way as the individual human being).

The interconnectedness between individual humans and larger social bodies, studied in the previous section, is at the heart of a Spinozistic conception of education. It resolves the apparent tension between egoism and education beyond self-education. The interdependency of different bodies also conditions the seemingly logocentric striving to become more rational by material constraints for two reasons. First, because the mind can only know things insofar as the body interacts with many external things, thereby subjecting the mind to many external ideas. Second, because the flourishing of the rational person is always preconditioned by a rational community insofar as a person can only flourish to the extent that he or she lives in a society promoting openness and the free exchange of ideas.

A society guided by superstitious beliefs tends to enforce these beliefs by way of threats of punishment. This, in turn, will come to affect those who are guided by reason whenever their reason contradicts the superstitious tenets of society. Rather than being strengthened by those who are guided by reason, a society guided by superstition will seek to silence them through censorship and coercion so as to safeguard its beliefs. While a superstitious society will flourish when people are kept ignorant (and obedient), a rational community will do so only when its members are free to philosophize without the risk of punishment or censorship. Insofar as education is geared to increasing the rational understanding of students, it must therefore be set up as a form of rational community where it is the teacher's job to safeguard the free exchange of ideas. This means encouraging students to experience many things so as to understand them better. It also means making sure that superstitious beliefs and opinions do not interfere with the rational striving to understand more.

We are now in a position to see that rationality for Spinoza is neither decontextualized nor disembodied but is necessarily conditioned by my body's affective encounters with other bodies as well as by the constitution of the larger social body of which my body is but one interacting part. This does not mean that the scope of human understanding is always necessarily limited or fragmentary for Spinoza. It simply means that since we form ideas about the world by interacting with other bodies, we need to take this into account when we construe education as an endeavor to increase our rational understanding of the world. That is, we can and we should, in Spinoza's view, acquire true knowledge about the nature of the world, but we can only do so from the particular point of view of the affections of the body, which is our only source of information about the world.



We may conclude this part by asserting that there is always an ongoing interplay between the individual and society for Spinoza. On the one hand, the self-preservation of the individual human being is the fundamental motivation and driving force behind Spinoza's ethical theory. On the other hand, this individual striving is always conditioned by the common striving for self-preservation and empowerment on behalf of the greater community. This, of course, means that education – being a concern for the community – is also necessarily grounded in the egoistic striving of the individual. In what follows we will investigate what this means more specifically. In particular we will see how this plays out in relation to the popular image of the altruistic teacher.

### **Teaching for the sake of the teacher: Can good education be grounded in egoism?**

So far we have investigated the significance of Spinoza's claim that self-preservation is the foundation of virtue. We have also established that successful self-preservation is conditioned by a community that empowers its individual members by steering them toward the common goal of an increased understanding. This leaves us in a good position to investigate how all of this will affect the traditional roles of teacher and student, where the teacher is generally assumed to teach for the sake of the students and not for the sake of the teacher. We will do this armed with the knowledge that the egoistic striving for self-preservation does not exclude benevolence. Instead, we have seen that the striving of the rational individual is greatly benefited by helping others become more rational (which includes helping people in general so as to make them feel better and more inclined to regard us with benevolence). It remains to be seen how this plays out in an educational context.

There is a widespread and commonsensical notion of the “good teacher” as someone who sacrifices a lot in order to ensure that his or her students receive the education they deserve. We have gotten used to seeing this image in movies such as *Dead Poets Society* (Weir 1989) and *Dangerous Minds* (Smith 1995) to name but two popular examples. In *Dead Poets Society*, Mr. Keating (played by Robin Williams) is a devoted English teacher whose selfless love of teaching and of the students he is assigned to teach ultimately forces him to sacrifice his position as a teacher. The movie is in equal parts a critique of traditional schooling and a celebration of student-centered education. *Dangerous Minds* – centering around ex-Marine LouAnne Johnson (played by Michelle Pfeiffer) – portrays a teacher who faces the challenge of having to teach a group of students in a deprived urban area for whom education is far from top-priority. She manages to reach them by using various unorthodox teaching methods and by wholeheartedly devoting herself to the cause of educating them. Both of the examples given above, *Dead Poets Society* and *Dangerous Minds*, are also used by Alex Moore as examples of a dominant discourse describing the good teacher in terms of a “charismatic subject.” What is important to note is that



these popular discourses on teaching and the teacher actually help “construct and affect classroom practice and teacher education” in various ways (2004: 51).

These are two examples of popular and widespread images of teachers who dedicate themselves fully to the education of others. They are commonly contrasted with deterrent images of authoritarian teachers of old, caring little for teaching or for the ones they teach. A good example of this authoritarian teacher is the cold-hearted and cruel Miss Trunchbull from Roald Dahl’s book *Matilda* (1988). Miss Trunchbull’s teaching methods are based on coercion and threat. She is a sadistic teacher (and headmistress), tormenting the children as well as the good-hearted teacher Miss Honey. Miss Honey suffers the abuse of Miss Trunchbull but is eventually saved by her unselfish love for the children. The underlying message seems to be that to be a good teacher you need to be willing to look beyond your own personal gain and that self-sacrifice is an essential part of being a teacher. It also typically assumes that good teaching is synonymous with student-centered or child-centered education.

The good teacher, in this popular image, is a self-sacrificing altruist readily submitting to low pay and a modest social position in order to serve others for the sake of the well-being of future generations and the future of society. In contrast, the bad teacher is a selfish person driven by a desire for personal gain. Since personal gain is typically conceived of as something that is in competition – such as money or fame – this pits the bad teacher against his or her students in a struggle over finite goods. The cruelty of Miss Trunchbull may therefore be attributed to her desire for things that are in competition. The goodness of Miss Honey, in contrast, is due to her altruistic disposition, allowing her to sacrifice her own good for the good of the children.

This popular image of the good versus the bad teacher is clearly a caricature exaggerating specific character traits at the expense of others. Obviously, things are far from this clear cut in real life. Even so, it is interesting to note that these images – through countless representations in popular culture – have become part of the everyday language of teaching insofar as teaching for personal gain is not generally thought of as a legitimate motive for becoming a teacher. Instead, the model teacher is one who can overcome his or her egoism for the benefit of helping others become better people. Accordingly, I suspect that few people become teachers because of the generous pay they expect to receive or because of the high esteem they believe it will afford them with their peers. This raises important questions, relevant because Spinoza’s ethics of self-preservation seems to be at odds with the popular notion of the self-sacrificing and altruistic teacher.

Embedded in this commonsensical image appears to be the tacit construction of a dichotomous relationship between learning as student-centered and learning as subject-centered or teacher-centered. Avi Mintz argues that the student-centered approach to learning is one of the hallmarks of progressive education, where good education is commonly depicted as self-evidently student-centered and where “genuine learning is exciting and pleasurable (not joyless or painful)” (2012: 249). As Mintz goes on to argue, and as we will see later in this chapter and in Chapter Six, however, this dichotomy is problematic



insofar as it risks leading to a conception of learning where anything painful and challenging is routinely being avoided for the sake of ensuring a pleasurable experience on behalf of the student. “[T]he widely held belief that frustration, confusion, distress, and other painful moments in education inhibit learning,” Mintz argues, “has led to contemporary classrooms in which students are denied meaningful challenges and deprived of important educational experiences” (2012: 249–250). The turn from teacher-centered and subject-centered education to student-centered education is related to a more general turn in education from teaching to learning, typically grounded in “the all too common and all too facile critique of traditional teaching” (Biesta 2015: 14).

The problem with the image of the good teacher as a self-sacrificing altruist is that we seldom evaluate the theoretical underpinnings of the notion that teaching is a fundamentally altruistic service or that good education is treated as self-evidently student-centered.<sup>4</sup> For instance, in a recent study investigating the motivation of Swedish teacher students, it was found “that altruistic motives to become a teacher are the most important motives to focus on in order to have highly engaged students who remain in teacher education” (Jungert, Alm & Thornberg 2014: 183).<sup>5</sup> One of the conclusions drawn from this is that focus should be placed on “finding ways of promoting and enhancing altruistic motives among them” (Jungert, Alm & Thornberg 2014: 183) so as to prevent teacher students from abandoning their future careers as teachers.<sup>6</sup>

In his book *The Good Life of Teaching: An Ethics of Professional Practice* (2011) Chris Higgins engages in a critical discussion on the widespread altruistic ideal in education. Higgins summarizes the core arguments and assumptions behind the notion of teaching as an altruistic service in the following way: First, “[t]eaching is a deeply moral endeavor in which the welfare of other human beings, their current vulnerabilities and their future possibilities, is the teacher’s primary concern.” Second, since “acting on this concern requires a high degree of selflessness and sacrifice . . . [t]eachers who are self-absorbed, or trying to meet their own needs vicariously through their teaching, betray the moral core of teaching.” Third and following from the above, “good teaching is a selfless labour of love” and “the best teachers simply decide that the good they accomplish for others makes their own sacrifice worthwhile, and carry on indefinitely in the name of benevolent service” (2011: 170–171). Higgins’ summary of the arguments for the altruistic ideal of teaching corresponds very well with the popular image of the teacher represented in film and literature as discussed above. This goes to show that the image of the teacher as a self-sacrificing altruist is not just a popular representation found in various fictional accounts of education, but that this fictional account has been very influential insofar as it has helped shape the general notion of what makes a good teacher good and a bad teacher bad. Offering a critique of this self-sacrificing ideal of teaching, Higgins suggests that “[t]his altruistic stance . . . is unsustainable and ultimately undesirable because it tends to collapse into asceticism and lead to ‘teacher burnout.’” Instead, Higgins asserts that “[g]ood teaching requires self-cultivation rather than ‘self-sacrifice’” (2003: 131).



In concluding that “[t]he ascetic teacher neither flourishes nor helps others flourish” (2003: 154), Higgins expresses a concern that accords well with Spinoza’s contention that rational benevolence actually presupposes a fundamental form of selfishness. In fact, from a Spinozistic standpoint, self-sacrificing (or any other act that hinders or impairs a person’s power of acting) implies that my striving to persevere in being is being thwarted by external forces more powerful than me – forces that will diminish my power of acting. Self-sacrificing, then, is inevitably linked with loss of power and sadness as opposed to empowerment and joy. Going back to Higgins’ presentation of the arguments for understanding teaching as an altruistic service, Spinoza would agree with the first claim, stating that teaching is indeed a moral endeavor in which the welfare of others is a central concern. He would do so since increasing the welfare (qua rationality) of others who are guided by reason is instrumental for my own successful self-preservation. He would object to the second claim, however, arguing that this does not at all require a high degree of selflessness, quite the opposite. Since Spinoza holds that helping others is a way of helping oneself – as the rational person benefits from being in a community of rational people – it follows that in order to perfect ourselves we actually *need* to help others so as to benefit from their increasing rationality. As for the third claim, stating that good teaching is a selfless labor of love, this rings equally false (for much the same reasons), and I would even go so far as to argue that from a Spinozistic point of view one might claim that good teaching is a fundamentally *selfish* labor of love.

That teaching is a labor of love does not, however, mean that education is necessarily painless. Instead, developing the ability to distinguish the pains that are necessary from those that are not is an essential part of understanding ourselves better, according to Spinoza. This, for example, involves learning to endure a lesser present pain so as to avoid suffering from a greater future pain (4p66), which, in turn, is part and parcel of becoming a happier, more educated, person. We will return to this shortly when we flesh out the concept of a moral education without moral responsibility. For now we need simply note that acting benevolently, for Spinoza, is not the same as shielding someone from pain. What is important is whether or not the pain one is subjected to can function as a means by which to avoid a greater pain – that is, whether the pain is useful or not in relation to one’s overall striving for self-preservation.

In contrast with the teacher as a self-sacrificing altruist, Spinoza introduces a rather counterintuitive perspective, where benevolence (and the act of teaching as a benevolent act) is always grounded in egoism. Because Spinoza grounds this claim in a solid metaphysical framework, this offers an interesting critical perspective from where to reevaluate our commonsensical notion of teaching. The point is that turning the tables on the teacher as altruist does not automatically render the teacher unethical. From the perspective of Spinoza’s ethics of self-preservation, there is no such thing as genuine altruism, if by this we mean acting without considering our own benefits. On the contrary, we always act so as to increase our own power of acting, whether we are actually aware of this or not. Therefore, it would be fair to say that from a Spinozistic



point of view, the teacher teaches primarily for the sake of the teacher. This is so since everyone acts “on account of their advantage, which they want” (1app). As we have seen, however, being selfish does not in any way preclude helping others. Being rational actually requires benevolence insofar as rational people need other rational people in order to flourish, and insofar as rationality is preconditioned by a certain degree of material and social security. We will return to and look deeper into this in Chapter Five when we investigate the educational implications of Spinoza’s doctrine of the imitation of affects. At this point it is called for to address another challenge facing an educational account informed by Spinoza’s ethics of self-preservation; namely Spinoza’s denial of moral responsibility.

### **Moral education without moral responsibility**

Besides the seeming tension between the self-preservation of the teacher and the flourishing of his or her students, there are other – equally pressing – concerns raised by Spinoza’s psychological egoism. As we saw in Chapter One, Spinoza’s causal determinism does not seem to allow for a free will in the sense of an uncaused will where freedom is understood as a freedom from restraint. Without a free will, the related notions of moral responsibility and moral agency are obviously seriously threatened. In this section we will investigate this issue closer, asking: Can we conceive of a viable notion of education without a stable concept of moral responsibility? And what are the possibilities of moral agency in education if freedom does not mean freedom from restraint? Moral agency, in this context, refers to the Cartesian notion that by virtue of having a mind, humans are generally taken to have a different kind of influence over their actions than do other animals and can therefore refrain from acting in ways deemed immoral.

In order to close in on Spinoza’s understanding of moral responsibility, it is helpful to first briefly revisit his understanding of freedom. In the first part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza defines freedom as follows: “That thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone” (1D7). Commenting on this definition in a letter to G. H. Schuller, Spinoza remarks that: “So you see that I place freedom, not in free decision but in free necessity” (Letter 58, S: 909). This obviously begs the question of how something that is conceived as necessary can at the same time be conceived as free. Finite things are caused to exist by other finite things, and so finite things cannot be free in the strict sense of this definition. Finite things are thus determined externally and cannot be held responsible for their actions in any absolute sense as these actions are necessitated and therefore cannot be conceived to be unrestrained actions. Spinoza offers a clarifying example in his letter:

A stone receives from the impulsion of an external cause a fixed quantity of motion whereby it will necessarily continue to move when the impulsion of the external cause has ceased. The stone’s continuance in motion is



constrained, not because it is necessary, but because it must be defined by the impulsion received from the external cause.

(Letter 58, S: 909)

Having offered this example, Spinoza adds: “What here applies to the stone must be understood of every individual thing, however complex its structure and various its functions. For every single thing is necessarily determined by an external cause to exist and to act in a fixed and determinate way” (Letter 58, S: 909). This follows from Spinoza’s mechanistic understanding of the universe stating that: “A body which moves or is at rest must be determined to motion or rest by another body, which has also been determined to motion or rest by another, and that again by another, and so on, to infinity” (2p13l3).

As we saw in Chapter One, however, there is another conception of freedom that applies to finite modes and that does not require total self-causation but involves only degrees of self-determination. This gradual conception of freedom entails that to the extent that a human being acquires adequate ideas about fundamental natural laws such as motion and rest, and continue to deduce other adequate ideas from these, such a person will gain a greater degree of freedom with regard to some of his or her actions. This person would be just as bound by the causal necessity of nature as anyone or anything else, but by virtue of understanding the basic workings of nature (through the common laws of nature), can act so as to be an adequate cause in certain circumstances. For something to be an adequate cause means that an “effect can be clearly and distinctly perceived through it” (3D1). That is, we are the adequate cause of our ideas, as we saw in the previous chapter, when we understand the causal histories of these ideas fully. We have many ideas that we cannot be the cause of in this sense (as we do not have access to their full causal histories). To the extent, however, that we manage to reorder some of our ideas so that we approach them from the point of view of the common notions, we may become the adequate cause of these (and the ideas that these give rise to) by virtue of understanding them.

Hence, while this account of freedom entails a freedom of the understanding, it does not, however, entail a freedom in the sense that our actions are undetermined as we cannot alter the causal chain of which we are already a part. A decision of the mind, on Spinoza’s account, is therefore not a matter of choosing freely what we want but is rather a matter of deriving pleasure from an idea. As Koistinen puts it: “If somebody represents himself doing A and this representation brings pleasure and no conflicting representation brings more pleasure, the agent can be said to have decided to do A” (2014: 227). This is a far cry from the commonsensical understanding of a decision of the mind where we imagine the mind to order the body to do something at will. Since Spinoza denies the possibility of mind-body causation, however, he “also denies the possibility that humans can bring about their own actions, and thus, of moral agency” (Kisner 2011: 5). When Spinoza is confronted about his denial of unrestrained human agency, and in particular about where this leaves him with regard to moral responsibility, he replies: “As to his final remark, that ‘on this basis all



wickedness would be excusable,' what of it? Wicked men are no less to be feared and no less dangerous when they are necessarily wicked" (Letter 58, S: 910).

In the Appendix to his *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, Spinoza makes it clear that he distinguishes between the prevention of evil acts (evil in the sense that they are harmful to me and those that are like me) based on the desire to persevere in being and the superstitious notions of praise and blame (hinged on the confused notion that we act freely and unrestrained and on the confused notion that God or Nature holds moral values). Denying the notion that we either choose to be virtuous or to be sinful, Spinoza sees no problem in letting self-preservation dictate what is good or bad, noting that we tend to do so in affairs deemed to be outside of the moral realm and that this should be no different. He writes: "If only those were fit to be punished whom we feign to sin only from freedom, why do men try to exterminate poisonous snakes? For they only sin from their own nature, nor can they do otherwise" (CM II, 8/C: 331). People, Spinoza argues, are no less determined to act from their own nature than snakes are, and so evil acts ought to be punished because they are harmful and not because they are willfully evil or worthy of blame. Incapacitating the wrongdoer will prove beneficial for those who are likely to suffer from the poison, but because these acts are determined by an infinite chain of external causes, it is pointless to place blame with the accused perpetrator (being one intermediate cause among many). Sin (i.e., those acts that are typically labeled sinful) for Spinoza is its own punishment since the life of sin is seldom a life of lasting joy. Likewise, virtue (i.e., an increased understanding and power of acting) is its own reward (5p42), and instead of conceiving of rewards or punishments as something to be enjoyed or endured in the afterlife, Spinoza understands a virtuous life to be a reward all on its own.<sup>7</sup> Spinoza's naturalism informs his understanding of virtue and sin, and this leaves little room for moral responsibility. Somewhat laconically, he concludes that:

A horse is excusable for being a horse, and not a man; nevertheless, he needs must be a horse, and not a man. He who goes mad from the bite of a dog is indeed to be excused; still, it is right that he should die of suffocation. Finally, he who cannot control his desires and keep them in check through fear of the law, although he also is to be excused for his weakness, nevertheless cannot enjoy tranquility of mind and the knowledge and love of God, but of necessity he is lost.

(Letter 78, S: 952–953)

The upshot of this denial of moral responsibility is that, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a morally wrong thing to do. Things are good or bad for us depending on whether they affect us with joy or sadness, and so it is morally right for me to desire and actively pursue all things that affect me with joy and that empower me. For someone whose nature is different from me, however, this may not be the case. And so judgments of good and bad are always relative to – and conditioned by – the constitution of my body and my mind. Since humans who are guided by



reason agree in nature we may identify things that are more or less generally good and bad for all, but this does not automatically translate into a neutral framework in terms of a universal moral law. This has led some commentators to describe Spinoza as an ethical constructivist. Charles Jarrett, for instance, notes that:

[Spinoza's] view diverges from our own ordinary view merely because he thinks that the concept of moral permissibility (or having a right to do something), necessarily applies to everything actual and the concept of what is morally wrong necessarily applies to nothing. This seems to me so large a difference, however, that his view is better described as rejecting, or not having, moral concepts of what is right, wrong, or permissible.

(2014: 73)

Now we are in a position to see quite clearly that a Spinozistic conception of education would not revolve around concepts such as praise or blame. As actions cannot be ascribed a moral value apart from context, the notion of a neutral framework for evaluating actions is rendered nonsensical. Instead education would take the form of a cognitive training geared to the recognition and affirmation of things that empower us individually in a manner that is guided by the dictates of reason (making sure that the things we strive for really do empower us). Spinozistic education, in this sense, corresponds rather well with traditional schooling insofar as recognizing the good requires an increased adequate understanding of the world. This, as we have seen, is intimately connected with understanding the affects adequately, as this understanding may prevent me from confusing the changes that I undergo as an effect of interacting with an external body for a genuine property of that external body. The goal, then, is to be able to separate the affects – the changes that we undergo – from the thought of an external cause (5p4s). This may sound relatively straightforward and simple, but when we contemplate the extent to which our lives are guided by affective changes that arise due to ideas of external things – such as love and dislike for people and things that we encounter in our everyday lives – and when we contemplate the extent to which we tend to ascribe properties to these external things rather than to the effects of the encounter between ourselves and the external body, we also realize the limited control we have over our affective fluctuations. To gain a degree of influence over these fluctuations – so as to achieve a degree of tranquility of mind and improve our mental health – may be termed one of the principal goals of education from a Spinozistic perspective.

To be able to separate affects from thoughts of external causes is no easy feat, however. Once we are able to do this, we will already be well on our way to becoming educated and relatively active and self-determined people. Spinoza concedes that when we lack adequate knowledge of our affects, it is better to abide by the dictates of reason – making sure that our striving is aligned with rational desire – so that these dictates may come to affect our imagination in a way that make us behave rationally even though we are not yet fully rational (5p10s). Educators, dealing with people who are not yet fully rational,



can therefore not assume that students have the ability to separate affects from thoughts of external causes (as they typically lack the knowledge to be able to do so). Instead, it will be more productive to practice on applying the dictates of reason while at the same time learning more about the natural world so as to develop a rational understanding that, over time, will make it possible to separate affects from thoughts of external things as Spinoza recommends in 5p4s.

As we will come to see later (especially in Chapter Five and Chapter Six), there is a strong element of working toward gaining a greater degree of control over one's immediate responses to external things in Spinoza's practical guide to an ethical life. In 4p66 Spinoza writes: "From the guidance of reason we want a greater future good in preference to a lesser present one, and a lesser present evil in preference to a greater future one." This opens up an area of practical application with regard to the cognitive training of a Spinozistic education, where students may practice on abiding by the guidance of reason without being in a position to understand their affects adequately. More specifically, it targets the human tendency to seek immediate satisfaction rather than working toward long-term rewards. This means that rather than settling for the unpredictable satisfactions of transient things like money or fame – things whose comings and goings we ultimately do not control – students ought to be trained in the art of resisting these temporary pleasures for the sake of pursuing more long-term goals, such as increasing their degree of understanding and by doing so increasing their power of acting. Correspondingly, a Spinozistic cognitive training would involve thinking about the benefits of enduring a lesser present pain (such as studying hard for an exam) so as to avoid a more enduring pain in the future (such as living according to the opinions of others for lack of adequate knowledge).<sup>8</sup> A Spinozistic education is geared at the attainment of individual happiness. This, however, presupposes that we understand individual happiness as conditioned by a well-functioning community founded on the principle of the free exchange of ideas, and as a form of happiness fundamentally different from the temporary pleasure of acquiring transient things that we may desire.

It is noteworthy that a conception of education that involves learning to endure a lesser present pain so as to avoid a greater future pain (as well as to be able to judge which pains can and should be avoided) appears to run counter to the influential notion of student-centered education discussed earlier. This is so insofar as student-centered education hinges on the assumption that good education needs to be founded on the expressed interests of the students. From a Spinozistic point of view, this assumption is problematic since most people, suffering from a poor understanding of the affects, generally have a very vague idea of what it is that they need. This is the reason why most people tend to pursue lesser temporary goods rather than (Spinozistically conceived) long-term happiness. Overcoming this tendency, for Spinoza, requires undergoing a sometimes painful process of conditioning one's mind so as to be able to make intelligent choices (in the sense that one may derive pleasure from one's understanding) rather than blindly following the opinions of others. Because this process is necessarily painful – insofar as it requires giving up some of the



temporary pleasures one may be accustomed to – there can be no such thing as a painless education.

The goal is obviously not to set up an educational situation maximizing the discomfort of the student, but insofar as the long-term happiness and ethical flourishing of the student is the goal of education, this appears to require a measure of discomfort to the extent that breaking with destructive patterns of thought is necessarily painful. Spinoza addresses the usefulness of pain in 4p43 where he asserts that “pain can be good insofar as the pleasure, *or* joy, is evil.” For a pleasure to be evil simply means that it is excessive and that it functions to diminish one’s overall power of acting. Drug abuse is an example of excessive pleasure where a lesser pain (the pains of withdrawal) is necessary in order to restore the powers of the body and mind.

Recalling the previous chapter, we know that the ability to moderate passive affects comes down to a structured reordering of ideas. The reordering of ideas may be geared for enduring lesser present pains so as to avoid greater future pains. The reward of submitting to this temporary pain is that one may enjoy lasting happiness rather than having to settle for temporary pleasures that come and go. Mark E. Jonas, discussing the role of suffering in education, argues that both Rousseau and Nietzsche – both of whom offer nuanced discussions of the necessary role of suffering in education – target a conception of education that they claim hampers the self-mastery of the student. This critique is well aligned with Spinoza’s understanding. Jonas summarizes the critique in stating that “[e]ducation of this sort produces weak-willed conformists who are directed by the whims of their desires and the whims of their cultures’ desires” (2010: 49). In contrast, the goal of a Spinozistic education is to produce self-mastered students who can – by virtue of their increased understanding – resist such confused whims for the benefit of pursuing their own long-term happiness and the ethical flourishing of the larger community of which they are an integrated part.

Considering the parallelism of the attributes and the importance of embodied experiences for gaining knowledge of the affects, Spinoza has relatively little to say about how the dictates of reason apply to the body specifically. He does, however, briefly talk about the importance of experiencing many strengthening and vitalizing encounters in a way that clearly indicates that Spinoza’s conception of ethics is neither disembodied nor ascetic:

It is the part of the wise man, I say, to refresh and restore himself in moderation with pleasant food and drink, with scents, with the beauty of green plants, with decoration, music, sports, the theater, and other things of this kind, which anyone can use without injury to another. For the human body is composed of a great many parts of different natures, which constantly require new and varied nourishment, so that the whole body may be equally capable of all the things which can follow from its nature, and hence, so that the mind also may be equally capable of understanding many things at once.

(4p45s)



Far from constituting an insulated setting, removed from the distractions of ordinary life, education would need to take into account the fact that in order for students to gain experience and knowledge about themselves and the world they need to interact with many different things so as to form many different ideas. At this point we have established some key points about a Spinozistic conception of education. We know that it is grounded in the self-preservation and empowerment of the individual, making it basically egoistic. We also know, however, that the self-preservation of the individual is greatly benefited by the increased rationality of others, which is why the Spinozistic teacher helps students as a way of helping him or herself. We know that since Spinoza denies moral responsibility in any ordinary sense, education is not concerned with praise or blame but with increasing the rational understanding of the students. Since increasing one's understanding is a matter of understanding one's affective encounters with external things, it concerns experiencing different encounters and understanding these encounters according to the order of the intellect. This last part goes to strengthen the claim that education, from a Spinozistic point of view, amounts to something much broader in scope than what the term *moral education* generally indicates insofar as a Spinozistic education is geared toward increasing the rational development of students, which, in turn, is a matter of forming adequate ideas of the world. Having established these key characteristics, it will be helpful to contrast a Spinozistic conception of education with other influential understandings so as to get a clearer idea of what is at stake.

### **A brief comparison between a Spinozistic conception of education, Aristotelian character education and a care ethical approach to education**

As already mentioned in Chapter One, Spinoza's ethics of self-preservation is difficult to fit neatly into an already existing category of moral theory. While it shares key properties with moral theories such as virtue ethics, consequentialism and deontology, it also has characteristics that seem to warrant a label like ethical constructivism. In order to draw out some concrete implications of Spinoza's moral theory for education, it therefore seems useful to, however briefly, relate my conception of a Spinozistic education to other influential forms of education (drawing on different ethical traditions). In order to cover a wider span, I will first take a look at how a Spinozistic education would compare to an Aristotelian moral education as conceived by such contemporary philosophers of education as Kristján Kristjánsson and Wouter Sanderse. The reason for this is the common ground that Spinoza shares with Aristotle in highlighting the importance of developing a virtuous character and in their shared focus on the intrinsic value of striving for *eudaimonia* as a lasting form of happiness (Aloni 2008). Having done so, I will relate a Spinozistic education to a care ethical approach as envisaged by Nel Noddings. This is done on the grounds that Noddings' focus on embodied ethics and on the centrality of emotions warrants a comparison between the two. Rather than discussing a Spinozistic conception



of education in relation to several different traditions, I will focus on these two as they provide two different – theoretically influential – examples of how to conceive of education from an ethical perspective while still sharing certain key elements with their Spinozistic counterpart.<sup>9</sup> The purpose is ultimately to highlight some important differences between the three theoretical approaches so as to illustrate the specific contribution of a Spinozistic account of education.

In terms of its general appeal for contemporary moral education, many of the benefits that Kristjánsson (2014) identifies with regard to Aristotle also seems to apply to Spinoza. Like Aristotle, Spinoza offers a moral theory that provides a strong naturalistic account of human nature; a moral theory that offers a model of human flourishing available to all; the adaptability of the moral language (both Aristotelianism and Spinozism can be expressed through ordinary moral language, although, as we have seen, while Spinoza speaks of good and evil, virtue and sin, he supplies a strictly naturalistic account of these concepts); the centrality of emotions and the attention paid to the moderation of the passive affects; and a non-individualist approach (even though I read Spinoza as a kind of psychological egoist, his notion of the well-being of the individual human being is conditioned by the overall state of the greater moral community).

In very broad terms one might start by asserting that both an Aristotelian and a Spinozistic conception of moral education serves “the general aim of managing our emotional life with intelligence” (Kristjánsson 2007: 2). For Spinoza, as we have seen, this requires an adequate understanding of the affects so that one may recognize and act on the good rather than being guided by passive affects. It seems that in broad strokes a Spinozistic education and an Aristotelian character education is geared toward the same general goal – namely the aim of attaining overall happiness where happiness is distinguished specifically by self-determination and self-control.

To come to understand what happiness consists in is one of the distinguishing traits of a moral person for Aristotle. This sets him or her apart from people with a less developed moral character. Aristotle names people of a less developed moral character the morally indifferent and they are characterized by their tendency to “believe that happiness consists of things such as bodily pleasure, honour or money” (Sanderse 2015: 388). This, in turn, makes them susceptible to various external forces that influence the comings and goings of the things they desire, and in this way they may be said to lack sufficient self-control. It makes them very fickle insofar as their behaviors are determined, to a high degree, by whether or not they happen to be in possession of the things they associate with the good for the moment. As Sanderse points out:

For example, when someone becomes ill, he will come to believe that health is the most important thing, but when he loses his job he will suddenly think that money matters more. The life of “the many” is unstable and chaotic because they live by their whimsical passions and because these passions are impenetrable to the voice of reason . . .

(Sanderse 2015: 388)



This whimsical and unstable existence described by Aristotle as the fate of the morally indifferent is also characteristic of Spinoza's understanding of a person suffering from a confused understanding of the good. While this is a question of morality for Aristotle, for Spinoza it is simply a question of a person's degree of rationality (since Spinoza reduces the good to the true). Accordingly, Spinoza does not label these people morally indifferent (or immoral) but rather irrational. Being irrational will lead to an unstable life where frequent vacillations will cause the mind to suffer from a confused understanding of the good, leading a person to pursue sometimes this and sometimes that, all depending on the passive affects that happen to be affecting him or her for the moment. Another consequence of this instability is that a person lacking a stable concept of the good is constantly at the mercy of the opinions of other people. This, in turn, may result in a life dictated largely by the fear of punishment and the hope of reward and as the prospect of either of these things loom ahead a person will be driven to do things not because he or she knows them to be good but because that person strives to avoid pain and to feel pleasure.

For Aristotle, "[w]hen people on the level of 'moral indifference' obey laws or commands, it is not because they see their purpose, but because they are afraid that bad consequences will follow" (Sanderse 2015: 389). Aristotle's understanding of a moral person (much like Spinoza's understanding of a rational person) is that of someone undergoing a gradual development. That is, while the truly virtuous person acts because he or she knows that something is good (and understands that virtue is its own reward), a less developed moral person may need to be prompted to act virtuously by external stimuli as a way of inculcating a moral response to certain situations that will, over time, become automated. Accordingly, "educators would be well-advised to take into account that some people who are on this level can come to abstain from vicious deeds through external pains, and learn to do the virtuous thing through the association of virtue with reward" (Sanderse 2015: 389). The education of a person therefore differs depending on how well-developed that person is. The notion that education needs to be sensitive to the particular development of the individual student applies to both Aristotle and Spinoza, even though, as we have seen, Aristotle places focus on the moral level of people while Spinoza is more concerned with the degree to which they are guided by reason. This aspect of education is something that we will have cause to revisit in Chapter Six when we discuss the role of the teacher in relation to Spinoza's conception of the state and the question of teaching and authority.

Sanderse concludes his discussion on moral development in Aristotle by arguing against the view that Aristotle's ideal of gaining full control over one's emotions is attainable. He writes:

After discussing all kinds of all-too-human emotions involved in moral development, such as fear, disappointment, prospective shame and remorse,



I doubt whether Aristotle's ideal, which described things always with respect to their true or most fully realised form, can ever be exemplified by anyone . . . Being virtuous, i.e. having reached the last stage of moral development, would mean that one has ceased to experience these emotions.  
(Sanderse 2015: 393)

In response to this I would say that while Aristotle may present us with an ideal that appears to be impossible to live up to, Spinoza, in fact, does not. Understanding that we can never escape the fact that we are finite modes, and therefore to some extent determined by our passive affects, Spinoza's dictates of reason are designed to take this necessary deficiency into account while supplying a form of compensatory cognitive aid helping us to strive for the good even when we have trouble recognizing it. Agreeing with Aristotle on the importance of moderating the passive affects, Spinoza, unlike Aristotle, never assumes that we could ever hope to escape the influence of them altogether.

This brings us to the two points in which Aristotle's and Spinoza's moral theories differ from one another more markedly. The first point concerns the question of moral responsibility, and the second concerns the status of good and evil. These two points are no doubt related, but I will deal with them each in turn so as to avoid unnecessary confusion. For reasons already accounted for, Spinoza's strict necessitarianism will not allow for a notion of a free will in the sense that this will is understood to be uncaused or spontaneous. Instead, Spinoza argues that most people assume that they have a free will simply because they are unaware of the many causes determining them to act. If they knew this they would see clearly that they are just as determined by an infinite chain of causation as any other finite thing in the universe. Spinoza's anti-humanism thereby constrains his ethical theory insofar as it will not allow for rules instituted or adapted especially so as to cater for the human desire to rise above the rest of nature "as a dominion within a dominion" (3pref). This, for Spinoza, betrays a prejudiced understanding of nature, and it is inimical to his causal determinism and his substance monism.

While the question of free will did not become prominent in Western moral theory until the thirteenth century, when thinkers such as Aquinas transformed Aristotelian ethics so as to fit with the Christian worldview (Kent 1995), it is obvious that Aristotle assumes that humans have the ability to direct their actions in accordance with their personal moral understanding. Accordingly he writes:

For where it is in our power to act it is also in our power not to act, and *vice versa*; so that, if to act, where this is noble, is in our power, not to act, which will be base, will also be in our power, and if not to act, where this is noble, is in our power, to act, which will be base, will also be in our power.  
(Aristotle 1984, 2.III.1113b: 1758)

As Heidi M. Ravven (2013: Chapter One) has illustrated, contemporary character education is very much shaped by the reconciliation of Aristotelianism



with the Christian understanding of a free will, making personal decision-making into a central feature of moral education. This means that even if Aristotle does not offer a conception of free will that corresponds with the Christian understanding – necessary for relating all vices causally to the will – there is still a sense in which he allows for the human ability to make moral decisions and to act on these decisions as is evident from the quote above. For Aristotle, a moral agent (i.e., a sufficiently self-mastered person) is worthy of either praise or blame depending on the course of action chosen.

The notion of moral agency follows from Aristotle's doctrine of final causes, and as such, it plays an important part in his moral theory. Aristotle subscribes to "the idea that (human) nature has an intrinsic *telos*, end or purpose" and "that whole organisms, including animals and human beings have a final cause, that for the sake of which they are done and made" (Sanderse 2012: 179). This aspect of Aristotle's metaphysics has proven problematic for contemporary virtue ethicists as it "presupposes a biology which is both essentialist and teleological" (Sanderse 2012: 179). In taking on this problem Sanderse asks: "Can there be a viable neo-Aristotelian approach to ethics and moral education without an appeal to a kind of nature that is already well-ordered and waiting to be perfected?" (Sanderse 2012: 179). Without delving into Sanderse's answer to this question, which would take us too far afield from the matter at hand, it serves our purposes to simply note the gap between Aristotelianism and Spinozism that this question reveals.

In the Appendix to Part One of the *Ethics*, Spinoza famously criticizes the notion of final causes, identifying it as a superstition made up to compensate for the human inability to conceive of a non-purposeful nature. The notion that nature is well-ordered is equally prejudiced in that it says nothing about nature itself. All it does is tell us something of the limited and fragmented human perception of nature. This inadequate understanding of nature, Spinoza argues, then gives rise to a host of other misconceptions, such as the belief in a free will and in the reality of moral labels such as good and evil. One of the key differences between Spinoza's and Aristotle's moral theory, then, is – as we have discussed at length in the previous section – that since Spinoza does not allow for a free will, he cannot appeal to a concept of moral responsibility as there is no faculty to ground this responsibility in. It is important to note in this context that when we speak of choices in Spinozistic terms, we are therefore not speaking of a unique human ability to circumvent natural causation, but of an increased awareness of this causation, which, in turn, results in a tranquility of mind.

As we have seen, for Spinoza, there is no such thing as an objective good or evil. What is good is simply what benefits me in my striving to persevere in being and what is bad is what hinders me in this effort (i.e., what agrees [4p31] respectively disagrees [4p30] with my nature). Nature qua substance knows no good or evil just like it knows no evaluative labels whatsoever (4pref). It is only when we begin to compare things from our limited perspective as finite modes that it makes sense to label one thing beautiful and another ugly. Again, all this means is that the things we deem beautiful agree with our nature and the things we deem ugly do not. From the perspective of nature, all things are



equally perfect. Spinoza's critique of the tendency to ascribe intrinsic values to things is harsh and unapologetic. He connects it with the human tendency to assume that nature is driven by final causes (1app).

This misconception on the part of humans (as well as its many unfortunate effects) is the principal target of Spinoza's anti-humanism. The problem he identifies is that it will, contrary to popular belief, lead to bondage and suffering rather than freedom and happiness. As soon as things diverge from our expectations (as they are destined to do sooner or later) we will be disappointed, and we will become torn by passive affects. Coming to accept that nature does not submit to our moral framework, in contrast, may lead to a kind of mental freedom in that we no longer expect unrealistic things and in that we may find comfort in knowing that things happen because they are determined to happen by efficient causes rather than because they are governed by a supernatural will that we may try, but will ultimately fail, to manipulate.

For Aristotle, in contrast, it makes perfect sense to talk of good and evil as intrinsic qualities. Good and evil, for Aristotle "was objective and independent of human wishes" (Miller 2012), and so this amounts to another major break between Spinoza and Aristotle. In the context of education, this means that while both Spinozism and Aristotelianism are geared toward the goal of *eudaimonia*, the path leading up to this goal must be laid out differently according to how one understands the capacity and limits of the will and how the concepts of good and evil are taken to relate to things in the world. On a more general level, this also means that Spinoza may be said to present a forceful critique of Aristotelianism, claiming that Aristotle's conceptions of moral agency and of good and evil will always constrain his conception of *eudaimonia* insofar as they will keep him bound to the very things that stand in the way of the path to true happiness. Because good and evil are objective qualities of things for Aristotle, it matters greatly how we approach them. For Spinoza, in contrast, since a thing is sometimes this and sometimes that, depending on the circumstances, we should never confuse it with the true cause of our happiness. Similarly, we should never attribute to it a value that says more about our perception of it than it does about the thing itself.

Let us then move on to another prominent tradition that has had considerable impact on the theorizing of education in recent years, namely the ethics of care as outlined by Nel Noddings. A Spinozistic conception of education has much in common with a care ethical approach to education. To begin with the concept of caring is central for both accounts. It should be noted, however, that for Spinoza the care for the self takes precedence over the caring for others,<sup>10</sup> the latter being Noddings' central concern. To a degree, then, the object of care differs in these two accounts. It is a gradual difference, however, since Spinoza acknowledges the importance of caring for others (as part and parcel of the rational caring for the self) and since Noddings acknowledges the importance of caring for the self (as an important aspect of being a caring person capable of sustaining a caring relation).

We might say that while, for Noddings, the foundation of virtue is the caring relation,<sup>11</sup> for Spinoza it is self-preservation.<sup>12</sup> These are obviously not mutually exclusive but rather conducive to one another. However, it is clear that



whereas Noddings grants primacy to one, Spinoza grants it to the other. Noddings' prioritizing of the caring relation places a great deal of focus on the needs and desires of the recipient of care (in the case of education, this would be the student) and on the caregiver's ability to meet these needs. It is not a one-sided relation, however. Like Spinoza, Noddings recognizes the necessary interdependency of an ethical relation. From a Spinozistic point of view, as we have seen, the successful self-preservation of the teacher is conditioned by the moral growth of his or her students (and the community). Similarly, for Noddings the quality of the caring relation hinges on the reciprocity between "the one-caring" and "the cared-for." To this end Noddings concludes that:

The ethics of care rejects the notion of a truly autonomous moral agent and accepts the reality of moral interdependence. Our goodness and our growth are inextricably bound to that of others we encounter. As teachers, we are as dependent on our students as they are on us.

(2007: 234)

While there are clear similarities between a Spinozistic account of education and a care ethical approach to education – such as the connection between the moral development of teacher and that of the student, the focus placed on "the character, attitudes and moral resources of moral agents" and the "close relationship between human goods and moral virtues" (2007: 226) – there are also differences. Much like with Aristotelian character education, one such difference results from Spinoza's denial of moral responsibility.

The concept of moral responsibility is intimately linked with the concept of evil. In the Introduction to *Women and Evil*, Noddings asserts that "evil is real and that people must find a way to face and overcome it" (1989: 1). This knowledge, Noddings continues, entails that "we require . . . a morality of evil – a carefully thought out plan by which to manage the evil in ourselves, in others, and in whatever deities we posit" (1989: 1). Spinoza, on the other hand, does not recognize evil in any real or intrinsic sense. As we have seen, things are called evil only insofar as they are bad for a particular individual's endeavors to persevere in being (4p30). Evil, that is, is only a word used for describing an obstruction in relation to someone's striving. From the perspective of someone else, the same thing could very well be beneficial and would therefore be labeled good (4p31). From the all-encompassing point of view of God or Nature, however, evil is quite simply a nonsensical term. This means that a person, insofar as he or she acts in accordance with his or her nature – which is to strive to persevere in being (3p7) – is always acting in accordance with the good. If that person is acted on by external causes, however, he or she might do things that are against his or her nature and can then be said to commit evil acts. Strictly speaking, however, these acts are effects of external causes and therefore not acts that are caused by the person him or herself. As a result, Noddings' notion that we can be "evil in ourselves" is absurd from a Spinozistic perspective. This is so since any action we cause ourselves is by definition good insofar as it helps us



persevere in being. What is evil – as in what is bad for us – is therefore always, and by necessity, external to us.

This, of course, has consequences for education insofar as the removal of a stable notion of moral responsibility from moral education renders notions of praise and blame ineffective. That is, the focus of a Spinozistic education is not primarily on implementing changes – motivated by moral knowledge – in the ways that students behave. Rather, it is on helping students acquire a better understanding of why they behave the way they do (by gaining a more adequate understanding of themselves and the world) so that they can begin to reorder their ideas and thereby become adequate causes of their actions. This does not mean that learning to behave in ways that accord with reason is unimportant for Spinoza. Promoting benevolence, for instance, is important insofar as it helps us establish a rational community. We will do this automatically as rational people, since it is rational to act benevolently, but before we have reached this stage, we need to be frequently reminded of the dictates of reason so as not to relapse into ways of behaving that are guided by passive affects such as jealousy and greed. The main reason for acting in ways that accord with the dictates of reason, however, is so as to create an environment promoting an increased degree of self-understanding and self-empowerment.

Acquiring this understanding can, as we have seen, be a painful experience. Pain, however, is never an end in itself for Spinoza. Noddings, agreeing with this appraisal of pain, concludes that “pain itself has no purpose” (1989: 122). While being no end in itself, Noddings argues that pain and “[s]uffering can – like any other affective event – act as an impetus in a search for meaning, but that meaning must go beyond suffering itself” (1989: 130). The notion that pain can be – depending on the context – both useful and necessary for moral growth is, as far as I can tell, a conclusion shared by Spinoza (4p43, 4p43d).

In being geared to the acquisition of knowledge explaining our actions – which for Spinoza amounts to a knowledge of the affects – a Spinozistic education hinges on components reminiscent of Noddings’ outline of a care ethical approach to education. The care ethical approach is organized around the four major components of “modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation” (2007: 226). As we will see later in this book, both modeling and practice are central components of a Spinozistic education (as well as of an Aristotelian character education). When it comes to the components of dialogue and confirmation, however, there is at least one important difference that deserves to be addressed. While neither dialogue nor confirmation is unimportant for Spinoza, as will become evident in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, these aspects are understood differently from how Noddings perceives them. In order to see the difference between Noddings and Spinoza in this regard, it is useful to start by looking closer at the notion of the student’s needs. Both Spinoza and Noddings would agree – at least I assume they would – that an important part of the teacher’s job is to satisfy the needs of the students and that in order to satisfy these needs, there has to be a viable dialogue between teacher and student. They would, however, understand the concept of need in somewhat different ways.



Noddings differentiates between expressed needs and inferred needs, where expressed needs are taken to be those needs that are explicitly voiced by the recipient of care, and where inferred needs are those needs that the caregiver attributes to the cared-for (without the acknowledgment of the cared-for). The problem with inferring needs, Noddings argues, is that “[t]here are times when people do not want the rights that generous advocates would thrust on them; they want, instead, to have their expressed needs heard and acknowledged” (2005: 148). As is evident in this quote, Noddings’ conception of an expressed need is closely connected with a person’s wants.<sup>13</sup> The problem with this connection, from a Spinozistic perspective, is that there is no reason to believe that a student’s needs are the same as his or her wants. In fact, the merging of a student’s wants and needs is one of the main goals of a Spinozistic education. Needs, for Spinoza, are objective. A person’s (or any other finite mode’s) needs are dictated by the desire to persevere in being. As such they follow from Spinoza’s understanding that the essence of every finite mode is to strive to persevere in being (3p7). Anything furthering this striving, then, is to be perceived in terms of an objective need. Sometimes, however, we tend to mistake things that only appear to be conducive to our striving to persevere for things that really are good. This occurs when we are guided by our passive affects rather than by reason. Hence, as we will see later in this book (in Chapter Five and Chapter Six), there is a problem with turning to the students, asking them what they need, when they cannot yet be expected to have identified or to be able to act on these needs. It falls upon the teacher – acting the part of an optimistic nutritionist<sup>14</sup> – to oversee the process whereby a person’s needs and wants are joined. The problem with expressed needs, from a Spinozistic perspective, is precisely that they will often turn out to reflect the student’s wants and may therefore very well prove to hinder the ethical striving for self-preservation. Since Noddings warns against “the neglect of expressed needs” (2005: 153), this amounts to a notable difference between a Spinozistic and a care ethical approach to education. Having said that, it is clear that both approaches coincide in the overarching goal of catering to the needs of the student so that the student (as well as the teacher) may lead a more ethical life as a result.

In this chapter we have considered the constraints on education posed by Spinoza’s psychological egoism. It was argued that if we conceive of teaching beyond the commonsensical notion of teaching as a naturally altruistic and self-sacrificing service, that the teacher who teaches primarily for the sake of the teacher can be understood as a credible instigator of education insofar as self-preservation and self-determination, for Spinoza, is conditioned by collective flourishing. This is so since the individual human being is empowered by joining with others who are guided by reason. The key to understanding this is to understand Spinoza’s conception of a body and an individual, which is not privileging human beings in any substantial sense. This allows us to see the tight connection between the make-up of the individual human (guided by reason) and the make-up of the rational community, where one is strengthened and empowered by the other.

We have also seen that Spinoza’s naturalism, and more specifically his causal determinism, poses challenges for any substantial understanding of human



agency and in extension, for a viable concept of moral responsibility. Accordingly, it was concluded that a Spinozistic education cannot rely on moral responsibility, or on the practice of praising and blaming, but instead needs to establish the moral value of an act solely based on whether or not it aids someone in their striving for self-preservation and self-empowerment. Education, then, would be geared for facilitating the recognition of things that actually help the student in increasing his or her power of acting. The greatest threat to this is posed by the tendency to pursue temporary pleasures, and so a Spinozistic education would make use of Spinoza's dictates of reason in order to set up a form of cognitive training program conditioning the mind so as to reorder ideas and so as to associate certain situations with rational rather than passive responses. Such a cognitive training, in turn, is structured around what may be described as traditional schooling – where a more adequate understanding of the world results in a more realistic understanding of one's affective capacities. Before gaining this understanding in a more full sense, however, Spinoza's dictates of reason offer practical guidelines compensating for the natural limitations of our understanding. They teach us that benevolence is beneficial for us and that pain may be useful, and they encourage us to condition our minds by contemplating many different situations where these maxims of living well apply. This process of conditioning the mind may indeed turn out to be a rather painful experience for the individual student, insofar as it means learning to abstain from temporary pleasures in order to pursue long-term happiness. In this sense, a Spinozistic education breaks with some of the basic assumptions about learning, underpinning progressive education to the extent that progressive education relies on “the idea that learning can and should be pleasurable and painless” (Mintz 2012: 249).<sup>15</sup>

In the next chapter we will look closer at the role of the imagination in education. This will help us arrive at an understanding of the importance of experience for education, and it will give us a clearer idea of how a Spinozistic education can help moderate dangerous passive affects.

## Notes

- 1 This is why the love of God is conceived as the highest good for Spinoza. Since God is eternal and infinite, and since love is understood as a joy “accompanied by the idea of an external cause” (3DOE 6), this is a love that is not in competition and that is not conditioned by the comings and goings of ordinary things. Consequently, as Kisner notes, “[i]t follows that benevolence is both a means to and constitutive of our highest good, which Spinoza equates with the love of God” (2011: 161).
- 2 For an extended discussion on Spinoza's understanding of benevolence as a rational virtue see Nadler (2014). On the two competing conceptions of benevolence Kisner writes: “While Spinoza criticizes the latter [benevolence arising from pity] . . . he defends the value of benevolence, understood as the maxim to act for the benefit of others. Indeed, his complaint against *benevolentia* is that we should act for the benefit of others on the basis of reason rather than pity (4p50)” (2011: 135).
- 3 Spinoza's philosophical project may be understood in much the same way, as an endeavor directed at promoting self-understanding. Accordingly, Garrett notes that Spinoza “sought primarily to improve the character of human beings – both himself and others – by improving their self-understanding” (1996: 267).



- 4 Higgins claims that the altruistic response “has become so commonplace that we no longer view it as an answer at all” and that as a result “[t]he ideal of service has foreclosed the very question of the desires, needs, and aspirations of teachers” (2003: 140).
- 5 This study is based on a survey where 333 student teachers were asked about their motives for becoming a teacher.
- 6 Other international studies confirming the importance of altruistic reasons for becoming a teacher include De Cooman et al. (2007), Kyriacou and Coulthard (2000), and Struyven, Jacobs and Dochy (2013).
- 7 Accordingly, in a letter to Jacob Ostens, Spinoza concludes that “the reward of virtue is virtue itself, while the punishment of folly and weakness is folly itself” (Letter 43, S: 879).
- 8 This is related to a concern raised by John Dewey regarding the dangers of catering to the whims and temporary wants of the student. The problem with this, he argues, is that “[i]t sets up an attitude which operates as an automatic demand that persons and objects cater to his desires and caprices in the future” and that this, in turn, “makes him seek the kind of situation that will enable him to do what he feels like doing at the time. It renders him averse to and comparatively incompetent in situations which require effort and perseverance in overcoming obstacles” (1997: 37).
- 9 Unlike Kant, for instance, Aristotle, Spinoza and Noddings all recognize the tight connection between human desires, inclinations and rational thought. As David Carr notes, Kant’s understanding of moral rationality differs radically from the moral naturalism of Aristotle “precisely because of the sharp wedge that it drives between the ideas of moral judgment and natural inclination” (2012: 193).
- 10 In this aspect, Spinoza is clearly influenced by the stoic tradition of prioritizing the care for the self. For a good account of the link between Spinoza and stoicism the reader is referred to James’ “Spinoza the stoic” (1993).
- 11 Accordingly, in *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, Noddings laments the marginalized position of the caring relation (a flaw largely ascribed to the predominantly male gaze of moral philosophy) in traditional accounts of ethics, suggesting that “[h]uman caring and the memory of caring and being cared for, which I shall argue form the foundation of ethical response, have not received attention except as outcomes of ethical behavior” (1984: 1).
- 12 In 4p22c Spinoza writes that “the striving to preserve oneself is the first and only foundation of virtue.”
- 13 Noddings does not equate a need with a want. She acknowledges that since “[o]ur wants seem sometimes to be limitless . . . [n]ot every want rises to the level of a need” (2005: 149). Often, however, needs and wants coincide for Noddings.
- 14 The concept of the optimistic nutritionist is borrowed from LeBuffe (2010) and will be explicated in Chapter Five and Chapter Six.
- 15 It is important to note that when I speak of progressive education in this book, I am speaking of a general ideological trend that has proven to be very influential in modern education insofar as concepts such as child-centered or student-centered education have, in some contexts, gained the status of taken-for-granted notions meant to simply denote good education. I am not, that is, speaking of a theory or a particular school of thought as exemplified by Dewey’s writings on education even if these texts are commonly referred to in order to substantiate the above mentioned ideological claims.

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## 4 **Moderating the passive affects: Education, imagination and causation**

This chapter tackles the problem of the role of the passive affects in education. Since Spinozistic freedom is conceived as the direct result of a more adequate understanding of the world, and since passive affects are connected with an inadequate understanding of the world (insofar as passive affects are caused externally), the role of the passive affects in education needs to be investigated. This involves explicating the role of knowledge gained through the imagination, and it also demands a discussion on what it means to be able to understand natural causes adequately.

### **The role of the passive affects in education: Accounting for Spinoza's perspectivism**

Kisner argues that “human freedom, unlike ideal freedom, necessarily involves a degree of passivity and, in fact, requires it, since our very survival depends on the assistance of external things” (2011: 215). That is, since the external world inevitably impinges on our bodies in different ways, it would be meaningless to construe an account of human freedom as something above or beyond the ordinary world of experience.<sup>1</sup> This, as we have seen, follows directly from Spinoza's anti-humanist account of human nature (discussed in Chapter One) as being part and parcel of the common order of nature. So in a sense, the passive affects may be understood in terms of a necessary evil to be taken into account by education. This is not the whole truth, however, because as we will see in this chapter, the passive affects may even have a productive role to play in an educational setting.

As Spinoza's epistemology tells us, we gain knowledge about ourselves and the world through our bodily interaction with things in the world. That is, we can never gain knowledge in any other way other than through our bodies and the interaction between our bodies and external bodies. This is how new ideas come to be in our minds. When we encounter something our bodies change in that encounter. These bodily changes, in turn, are paralleled by changes in our minds. Some of these changes in our minds are passive in the sense that they are caused by the thing we encounter, and some of them are active insofar as they are caused internally. Most of them are passive however. Spinoza calls these



passive changes in the mind passions, and much of his moral theory is geared toward moderating our passions so that they do not dictate our lives any more than need be. Passions, for Spinoza, are related to bondage insofar as bondage is taken to mean the “lack of power to moderate and restrain the affects” (4pref). The problem with a life in bondage is that the person controlled by passive affects “is under the control, not of himself, but of fortune, in whose power he so greatly is that often, though he sees the better for himself, he is still forced to follow the worse” (4pref). To reconnect with the discussion in Chapter Two, even though we have access to adequate knowledge about ourselves via common notions, we often fail to recognize and to act on this knowledge (due to *akrasia*), acting instead on more powerful passive affects whose comings and goings are ultimately beyond our control.

Passions do not equal bondage however. Clarifying the relation between passive affects and bondage, Kisner notes that “our bondage consists not in merely *having* affects or passions, but rather in being so subject to them that one is unable to control himself” (2011: 8). This means that “the passions do not lead us into bondage unless they render us unable to control ourselves” and “[s]ince reason is essential to our nature . . . this entails that the passions are only harmful when they direct us contrary to reason” (2011: 8). The fact that passions are not always harmful appears to open up a window of opportunity for education insofar as the conscious endeavor to moderate passive affects may be taken to be one of its central goals. The moderating role of education does not appear to require the productivity of the passions, however, and so we must move beyond merely establishing the importance of the moderation of the passive affects if we are to understand how passivity can be utilized for the purposes of increasing our rational understanding and power of acting through education. How, then, may the passive affects come to play a productive role in an educational setting? To answer this question, it is helpful to return to Spinoza’s constructivist understanding of good and evil. In other words, it will be helpful to approach the question of how education can make use of the passions from the perspective of Spinoza’s psychological egoism.

As we have already established, moral knowledge, for Spinoza, is tantamount to understanding what is good for me in my striving to persevere in existence. Understanding what is good for me, in turn, appears to require some kind of experience of how I am affected by external things, insofar as the encounter with external things may be a source of adequate knowledge about myself. Passivity, then, may provide us with a range of experiences of the world, and it may show us what our bodies can and cannot do. To put it differently, passivity may help us establish the limits of our bodily capabilities.<sup>2</sup> Passivity thereby offers us information about ourselves that we do not already possess (and that we cannot gain in any other way). So, on the one hand, passivity is necessary since we cannot sustain ourselves in isolation, or as Spinoza puts it in 4p18s, “we can never bring it about that we require nothing outside ourselves to preserve our being.”<sup>3</sup> As he goes on to say, however, it is also useful for us insofar as “our intellect would of course be more imperfect if the mind were alone and did not



understand anything except itself.” From this, Spinoza concludes that “[t]here are, therefore, many things outside us which are useful to us, and on that account to be sought.” The trick, of course, is to be able to identify those things that are useful to us and to be able to distinguish them from those that are not. Since the things that are good for us are conditioned by the particular constitution of our individual bodies, it follows that we need to find this out individually through personal experience. We may be guided in this process by the dictates of reason, but ultimately we must find it out through experience. Because our bodies are differently constituted, we benefit from different things. On a general level, we all benefit from friendship and from being with other people striving for understanding and freedom, but when it comes down to establishing the more precise level of external stimuli that we benefit from, we are forced to establish this through experience in a kind of trial and error form of experimentation.

In this sense, a Spinozistic conception of education is inherently perspectival to some degree. Even if we may make general use of the dictates of reason, and even if it holds true for all that we benefit from repaying hate with love or from enduring a smaller present pain in preference to a greater future one, we still have to take into account the fact that we are all differently composed and therefore – to some extent – require different things to flourish. As we saw in the previous chapter, it may sometimes be necessary to subject a student to a painful experience, if it is the case that this painful experience can help ward off a greater future pain. A painful experience that will not serve the purpose of derailing a future pain, however, will not contribute to the self-preservation of the student, and so it should then be avoided. Because we are differently constituted, what is painful for us differs to some extent, and depending on how rational we are, we can withstand different degrees of external pressure. This goes to illustrate that whenever we are to apply a dictate of reason, we need to understand what it means in a specific context.

Even though, as we will investigate further in the next chapter, education involves some degree of imitation (as well as emulation),<sup>4</sup> there is a point after which each student must begin to identify and seek his or her own good (providing this is conducive to the general good of an increased understanding), which may very well mean seeking out different things insofar as different people are differently constituted. For one who has acquired a more adequate understanding of the world, the dictates of reason may come more naturally, and so that person may not need to practice as much as one who is still being torn by many passive affects. Similarly, one student with a very solid understanding of mathematics may not need to study in preparation for tests as much as one who is still struggling to understand the basics. For these two people to behave the exact same way would not make much sense. In addition, as our bodies are differently constituted, we need to be wary of these differences when calculating our daily intake of food and our need for sleep, et cetera.<sup>5</sup> These things may not appear to be very important in themselves, but for Spinoza, the more control we gain over these mundane things, the more we can see to it that these things assist us in bringing “about the preservation of the proportion



of motion and rest the human body's parts have to one another" (4p39). And as he establishes in 3p38d, "[t]he more the body is rendered capable of these things [of affecting and being affected in a great many ways], the more the mind is rendered capable of perceiving," making mundane interactions with external bodies into potential points of entry for enacting a life in accordance with the dictates of reason. In short, as James points out: "To sustain its pattern of motion and rest, a body needs to be acted on by external things" (2014: 145).

To simply experience many things, and to then pursue those that are most pleasing to us, is not, however, the aim of education. When we do this (as we are wont to do when we live according to our passions) we often misconstrue what feels good for the moment for what is really good for us (i.e., certainly helps us persevere in existence) in the long run. This is why Spinoza posits as a dictate of reason that we should "want a greater future good in preference to a lesser present one" (4p66). Spinoza's cognitive therapy may be helpful as a tool for alleviating the recognition of the greater future good and for aiding the student in resisting excessive temporary pleasures. From this we may gather that the ability to recognize and pursue the particular things that are good for us given our particular constitutions is the end rather than the starting point of education. Before we can recognize the good, we need help in establishing what we take to be good for us. One way of coming to recognize the good is by positing the teacher as a moral exemplar for the students to emulate (as we will see in Chapter Five). By observing the teacher acting according to the guidance of reason, students may gradually learn to recognize what is beneficial in general. By also experiencing many external things and by striving to understand the affective changes these encounters bring about, the student may combine the general knowledge of the good (illustrated by the teacher) with the knowledge of what is good in specific circumstances so as to arrive at a fuller understanding of the good life.

On a related note, recall that, in Chapter Two, we concluded that the flourishing of individual humans is always conditioned by a rational community. As Kisner notes, this entails that "we are necessarily passively affected in the commonwealth, where we depend on the activities of others, which increases our power (4p40; 4p35c1; 4app14)" and that "we benefit from the friendship of rational people, since we are inclined to imitate their behaviors (4app9; 4app12)" (2011: 169). That is, to an extent we (being finite modes) are determined by passivity insofar as we are dependent on other people for our ethical flourishing and on other things for our very survival. We are now in a position to see that the challenge for education is to turn this necessary passivity into an advantage where the passions are taken to provide a host of experiences without which we would be considerably less knowledgeable about ourselves and the world around us.

As we saw in Chapter Two, Spinoza labels those ideas that arise from the imagination inadequate insofar as they represent the world confusedly. This does not mean, however, that the imagination cannot be utilized for the purpose of increasing our rational understanding. In fact, Spinoza grants that the



imagination is a powerful thing and that it may be used to influence our behavior as a kind of compensation for lacking adequate knowledge of our affects. In 5p10s he writes that:

The best thing, then, that we can do, so long as we do not have perfect knowledge of our affects, is to conceive a correct principle of living, *or* sure maxims of life, to commit them to memory, and to apply them constantly to the particular cases frequently encountered in life. In this way *our imagination will be extensively affected by them, and we shall always have them ready.*  
(My emphasis)

In combination with the dictates of reason, the imagination may be exploited so as to counter powerful affects, so that “reason can colonize the imagination, exploiting the resources of the latter and expanding its own dominion” (Steinberg 2014: 191). This provides us with an opening for discussing how the dictates of reason can be used as valuable tools for making use of the imagination in an educational setting.

### **Learning through the imagination**

In one of the few philosophical treatments of Spinoza’s importance for educational theory – ‘Spinoza and the education of the imagination’ – Lloyd takes Spinoza’s account of the imagination as a point of departure for discussing education from a Spinozistic point of view. She claims that the tendency to dichotomize reason and imagination risks obscuring the important role of the imagination for Spinoza. To this end, she suggests that Spinoza’s ethical ideal of self-transformation – from bondage to freedom – “yields educational ideals centred less on the supremacy of reason than on the cultivation of the powers of the imagination” (1998: 158). Since imagination and bondage are closely knit, however, it remains to be seen how the imagination can be turned into an instrument for the promotion of freedom and rationality.<sup>6</sup>

In 2p17s Spinoza defines the imagination as follows:

[T]he affections of the human body whose ideas present external bodies as present to us, we shall call images of things, though they do not reproduce the [NS: external] figures of things. And when the mind regards bodies in this way, we shall say that it imagines.

While we do not gain adequate knowledge of external things through the imagination, we can still gain important information about our affective responses to external things, and this way the imagination may be understood in terms of “a form of bodily awareness” (Gatens & Lloyd 1999: 12). The reason why the imagination produces inadequate ideas of external bodies is (as discussed in Chapter Two) that it “represents more than one object [i.e. the external body *and* the body affected] yet the mind fails to distinguish between or among these



objects” (Della Rocca 1996: 61). That is, the imagination renders inadequate ideas to the extent that we rely on it to provide a truthful image of external bodies. Such an idea will be inadequate as it will be a composite image reflecting the external thing in combination with the affective changes we undergo. Insofar as we rely on our imagination to provide an image of our affective capacities, however, it may very well yield adequate ideas (although, admittedly, this would take some work). In fact this is our only source of information about our body. Spinoza says as much in 2p19 where he establishes that “[t]he human mind does not know the human body itself, nor does it know that it exists, except through ideas of affections by which the body is affected.” As we have already seen, this means that in order to come to know our bodies, we need to interact with many things so as to find out how it is affected by them and so as to form ideas of these affections. Lisa Shapiro provides a very helpful depiction of the role of the imagination vis-à-vis the rational striving to increase our understanding of our own bodies and our affective responses to external bodies. She writes:

The way the world impacts our ability to strive to persevere, our power to act, is our measure of things, our way of ordering the world. Through differentials in our power to act, through the affects, we come to be aware of particular things – objects in the world – and part of coming to be aware of particular things is taking them to exist. Imagination is the means through which we become aware of objects as objects.

(2012: 102)

This way of conceiving of the imagination renders it a kind of “anchor through which we can orient ourselves” insofar as it “affirms the existence of things and so sets up landmarks in the ever-changing causal order; it stabilizes the world in which we find ourselves, allowing us to make our way in it” (2012: 102). Education, then, may utilize this capacity and set up an educational encounter where the imagination is relied upon to come up with images of bodies in such a way that these may be recalled at a later point and be connected with specific affective changes, thereby facilitating the cognitive process of recognizing and affirming the things that are good for us in our everyday lives and for avoiding those that are not. It is important to always consult the dictates of reason when doing this, however. Otherwise we risk setting up patterns of association that lead to bondage rather than freedom as we lose track of the important connection between the good life and an increased understanding.

Through the imagination, a passive affect may be utilized to counter another (more harmful) passive affect, thereby increasing the overall power of acting of the striving person. Given that humans are not fully rational creatures, but are always to some extent governed by passive affects, it can be useful to learn to make use of the passive affects (via the imagination) so as to restrain or counter other passive affects. In this way, LeBuffe argues that “Spinoza’s theory of ideas of imagination includes an account of how a passion can increase the power of the whole mind: it does so whenever one passion restrains another in the appropriate



way” (2009: 216). In 4p7d Spinoza explains that in this way “the mind will be affected with an affect stronger than, and opposite to, the first affect, which will exclude or take away the existence of the first affect,” thereby functioning to empower the person affected vis-à-vis the most harmful passions. Again this relates to the level of rationality of the individual student. Depending on the adequacy of the student’s overall understanding of him or herself and the world, he or she may be more or less inclined to appeal to the passive affects when striving to persevere in being. A student who has a relatively well-developed understanding of him or herself may be less exposed to harmful passive affects while someone who is torn by many passions may need to counter these with less harmful passions more frequently. Again, since this concerns a gradual transition – from bondage to freedom – and since different bodies are differently constituted, it would be foolish to propose one and the same strategy for all.

For example, knowing that a particular piece of music tends to make me feel calm, I may call that melody to mind whenever I begin to feel agitated and risk being overcome by dangerous passions. Recalling the soothing melody at a time of distress may actually help me regain my composure and keep me from acting irrationally in the face of whatever it is that has upset me even though I do not understand the mechanism behind this affective transition. Given the uniqueness of our experiences, however, another person may find the same piece of music distressing, and so it would not be wise to recommend the same method to all, even though, on a general level, everyone benefits from the moderation of the passive affects. The dictates of reason, then, offer us a good general understanding of what we benefit from. How we come to pursue this, however, depends to a large extent upon how our imagination has been conditioned by our experiences insofar as different images evoke different affective transitions in us. Finding out which images I may call upon to trigger certain affective transitions in me thereby becomes an important part of getting to know myself better. We will return to this in the next chapter when we discuss the association of ideas and the benefits of coming to understand how our personal experiences shape the way we associate certain things with certain emotions.

In 4p1s, Spinoza discusses the manipulation of affects with regard to the imagination and to the notion that one affect may be countered by another, more powerful affect. In the following quote he indicates how the imagination may be exploited so as to counter a harmful affect:

It happens, of course, when we wrongly fear some evil, that the fear disappears on our hearing news of the truth. But on the other hand, it also happens, when we fear an evil which is certain to come, that the fear vanishes on our hearing false news. So imaginations do not disappear through the presence of the true insofar as it is true, but because there occur others, stronger than them, which exclude the present existence of the things we imagine, as we showed in 2p17.

(4p1s)



This, of course, is not an ideal situation to find oneself in, but given the strong hold that affects like fear tend to have over us, and given how they can send us into a downward spiral of increasing passivity, one can easily see how it may be called for to take advantage of the imagination so as to interfere with harmful passions. In this sense, a passive joy (recalling a particular piece of music) may function to derail a passive sadness (melancholy), thereby working in favor of the striving to persevere in being. In an educational context, it may be a good idea to practice on perfecting this manipulation of affects in a relatively harmless and less stressful setting than the one described above by Spinoza. LeBuffe gives a good example of a relatively common and mundane situation suitable for just this purpose. It is a good example because it targets something that most of us struggle with (with a varying degree of success) on a daily basis. He writes:

A current temptation, a cookie in the hand, can be powerful. It may well overwhelm my better judgment. For, even if I know that the cookie is bad for me, the cookie itself is right there, acting on me, pushing and pulling me to eat it. Supposing that it is against reason to eat the cookie, I will also have an active urge not to eat it. All imagination, Spinoza writes in the demonstration to 5p7, includes the present knowledge of the common properties, so just as my present experience pushes me to eat the cookie, my present experience urges me not to eat it. It is a fair struggle. May the more powerful push win.

(2014: 218)

Making use of the imagination to condition one's affective response to a cookie (i.e., the desire for sweetness) may indeed be a good way of illustrating how the passive affects can play a productive role in education. It also supplies a useful and concrete exercise to be practiced in the context of education. Practicing this in a context that is relatively harmless and where the stakes are not terribly high may function to prepare the student for future situations that are considerably more dramatic and potentially dangerous, but where the same basic principle applies. This way, the student can – using the imagination as a resource – build up an affective defense through persistent practicing so that when disaster strikes, the resulting sadness will be considerably subdued, and so that the self-preservation of the student is benefited. This is precisely what Spinoza talks about in 5p10s when he discusses how to learn to conquer hate by nobility. Here, he asserts that we “ought to think about and meditate frequently on the common wrongs of men, and how they may be warded off best by nobility.” This way, he claims, we may then “join the image of a wrong to the imagination of this maxim” so that “it will always be ready for us (by2p18) when a wrong is done to us.” By making use of our imagination and by practicing this frequently, we may – over time – Spinoza argues, form a path of association leading from being wronged to responding with nobility in such a way as to condition our behavior and reorder our minds.



This kind of cognitive training may be set up in different ways. With regard to the imagination, Lloyd discusses the benefits of working with useful fictions so as to be strengthened by one's ability to imagine rather than being enslaved. Although fictions fall under the category of the first kind of knowledge and as such are to be considered inadequate knowledge, there is a sense in which fictions may be used knowingly to promote certain affective responses and to suppress others. Fictions, in this sense, may be a gateway to adequate knowledge even if they do not fall under this category themselves. Lloyd explains:

Fictions – feigned ideas – partake of imagining; but through being criticized by reason they become a source of improving understanding. Fictions belong in the realm of cognitive values. They involve untruths that are not mistaken for adequate ideas but are knowingly entertained. They rework the experience of minds initially held captive by inadequate knowledge. Without themselves being adequate knowledge, they give access to it. Although partial or mutilated, fictions have their own distinctive cognitive role. The capacity to feign is a positive mental capacity, although one that can be ascribed only to fallible minds. We can feign only because we are ignorant; an omniscient being would be unable to feign. But it is a capacity with its own strengths, a positive response to our limitations as knowers. We have here a cognitive activity which belongs to the imagination rather than the intellect.

(1998: 163–164)

Because we are naturally limited as knowers – as we have seen in the previous chapter – in the sense that we cannot rise above our status as externally determined finite modes of substance or escape the limited perspectives of our bodies, it appears pointless to construe an educational theory that posits the transcending of passivity as an ideal to strive for. At the same time, a life governed by the passive affects is clearly antithetical to Spinoza's ethical project, which is geared to the moderation of the passive affects in a conscious endeavor to strengthen the self-preservation of the striving individual. It appears, then, that education is stuck in between two poles, negotiating the gap between the unavoidability of human bondage and the hard-to-reach ideal of human freedom. Lloyd presents a role for the imagination suitable for this scheme where “[t]he aim is not to transcend the fictions or illusions of the imagination, but to gain insight into their operations, and where appropriate to refine or replace them” (1998: 165). The difference, then, is between understanding that social fictions are just that and recognizing that they are not an adequate form of knowledge but that, when employed properly, they can facilitate the forming of adequate ideas, and believing that these fictions represent the truth, in which case we end up in bondage. Lloyd refers to this as “a schooling of the imagination” which describes the ability “to see through, improve and replace, destructive, oppressive fictions with other judged better able to sustain individual and collective *conatus*” (1998: 166).



This, then, hinges on the notion that there are different kinds of fictions. On the one hand, there are the fictions that will keep us in bondage, and on the other hand there are fictions that may, when properly employed, prove useful for the cognitive conditioning that serves to clear the mental path to freedom. This comes down to a difference between submitting to superstitions and fictions that rely on irrational images of the world (such as the notion that we will suffer for our earthly sins in the afterlife) and of making use of fictions that inspire us to overcome our passions by positing rational responses such as love and friendship. As we will discuss in Chapter Six, fictions may be an effective means by which the teacher may steer irrational students into complying with rational behavior. Religious myths are good examples of powerful stories that may come to have this effect on people. The story of Christ, for instance, may influence students to turn the other cheek even when they do not yet see the rational grounds for repaying hatred with love. On the other hand, this is a dangerous path to take, as it may equally well lead to a prejudiced understanding of the world where students are led to believe that certain groups of people are specifically chosen by God and elevated above the rest. To be able to use imaginative stories as a means by which to nudge irrational students closer to the ideal of rational behavior without driving them deeper into a superstitious mind-set is therefore one of the great challenges of utilizing fictions for educational purposes.

The notion that the imagination may serve a purpose in this context is connected with the fact that humans cannot gain adequate knowledge of particular things as they exist in space and time. Insofar as we need to identify external things that are helpful for preserving our being (to the extent that they can nourish us and expose our minds to more ideas) we are referred to knowledge of the first kind, formed from sensory experiences and our imagination. In other words: “Determining what constitutes the good *in situ* requires input from the imagination, since one cannot have rational knowledge of concrete particulars” (Steinberg 2014: 183). From an educational point of view, then, we have to acknowledge the fact that as finite modes we are always to some extent determined externally and therefore necessarily passive. Since passivity and activity (much like existence and freedom) are gradual notions for Spinoza, this is not as devastating for education (insofar as education is geared for deliberation) as it may appear at first glance. Instead, recognizing this necessary shortcoming on behalf of human cognition means that we may take advantage of the passive affects insofar as they provide us with valuable information about what is beneficial for our striving to persevere and what is not. The imagination, as a capacity to form images of external bodies as present to us, may be used in this sense to conjure up images of external things to desire consciously; things that we know to be good for us insofar as they comply with the demands of reason. This way, we can take advantage of the fact that “the mind as far as it can, strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the body’s power of acting” (3p12). To reconnect with the introduction of this chapter, we might say that the imagination can serve to help us regain control of ourselves vis-à-vis the powers of fortune in the sense that it can help us actually follow what is



good for us rather than having to settle for seeing the better while being forced to follow the worse (c.f. 4pref).

As already mentioned, being able to recognize the good implies having experienced many things so as to find out what is beneficial for the striving to persevere and what is not. This means that a Spinozistic understanding of education involves accounting for the role of everyday experiences, which, as we have just seen, is also connected with the inevitable passivity that this entails. A credible account of education based on Spinoza's ethics of self-preservation therefore needs to be constructed in such a way that it considers experience as a necessary aspect of any form of education without losing sight of the constraints posed by Spinoza's rationalist framework.

## Experience and understanding

The relation between experience and education is one of the cornerstones of educational theory. From Plato and onward the question of how personal experience pertains to the growth of understanding has been in focus for philosophical investigations concerned with the problems of education (see Hamlyn 2009). Famously, experiential learning is at the core of *Émile*, Rousseau's pivotal treatise on education, and one of the greatest educational thinkers of the twentieth century, John Dewey, notably asserted "one permanent frame of reference" for taking on the problems of modern education, "namely, the organic connection between education and personal experience" (1997: 25). The role of experience has been widely debated over the years and it remains one of the key concerns of educational theory, and as such it touches on issues that any credible account of education needs to relate to.

It is useful to take Dewey's discussion on experience as a point of departure when investigating Spinoza's understanding of the role of the experience for acquiring knowledge with regards to education.<sup>7</sup> There are several points of contact between the two that serve to highlight the educational claims implicit in Spinoza. The most obvious of these points of contact are as follows: First, experience is no guarantee of anything in itself; second, experiences that are immediately enjoyable may not be the ones that are most useful from an educational perspective; third, the educational worth of an experience depends to a great extent upon how it is connected with other experiences; and fourth, the role of the teacher is to enable experiences that are valuable in a long-term perspective and thereby, in part, to subject students to situations that may not always come across as painless or entirely pleasurable.

Experience, for Dewey, is neither good nor bad in itself. Instead, the value of an experience depends on how it is put to use in an educational context. This view accords well with Spinoza's contention that while experience provides us with valuable information about the world, this information is mostly unreliable as it mixes information about the world with information about our sensory responses to the world. In a similar vein, Dewey suggests that "[e]xperience and education cannot be directly equated to each other" as "[a]ny experience



is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience” (1997: 25). In other words, experience is a necessary part of life, and as such it can be ascribed a number of different roles and put to use in a number of different ways, many of which will not serve an educational goal. Experience may, as we have seen above, be exploited for the purposes of furthering a person’s understanding of the world, but it may also be misused so that the understanding is severely stunted.

One of the ways in which experience may impede the understanding is when we become too focused on seeking immediate gratification. This may lead us to pursue temporary goods that will not serve our striving to persevere in being in the long run, and as a result, our lack of focus will render us unable to make the most of our experiences. This brings us to the second point of contact between Spinoza and Dewey, stressing that the experiences we perceive as most enjoyable are often not the ones that will prove most useful from an educational perspective. As discussed earlier, the problem according to Spinoza is that we generally have a very poor understanding of our affects. Being unable to identify the things that are certainly beneficial for the striving to persevere in being, most people tend to settle for pursuing the things that are most pleasing for the moment. Since, as we have seen, the things that are most pleasing to us for the moment are seldom the things that are good for us in the long run, we end up seeking the very things that enslave us (such as money and fame).<sup>8</sup> Arriving at the same conclusion, albeit from a more pronounced educational perspective, Dewey concludes that “[a]ny experience may be immediately enjoyable and yet promote the formation of a slack and careless attitude; this attitude then operates to modify the quality of subsequent experiences so as to prevent a person from getting out of them what they have to give” (1997: 26). When it comes to education, not all experiences are of equal value, and the way of determining the educational value of an experience is not synonymous with identifying the most pleasurable experiences. Instead, the most useful experiences can sometimes be painful insofar as they force us to break with old habits and to reevaluate our preconceived notion of the good.

The third point of contact between Dewey and Spinoza concerns the notion that the value of an experience (much like the value of an idea) is by and large determined by how it is connected with other experiences. To this end, Dewey argues that “[e]ach experience may be lively, vivid, and ‘interesting,’ and yet their disconnectedness may artificially generate dispersive, disintegrated, centrifugal habits” (1997: 26). Experiences, that is, are not decontextual, and the meaning and value of a particular experience is always determined in relation to other experiences. Dewey labels the pedagogical principle founded on the interconnectedness of experience “the experiential continuum” (1997: 28). The continuity of experiences may be set up in such a way as to increase a person’s power of acting, but it may also be set up so as to diminish it. That is, the value of an experience “can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into” (1997: 38). This accords with Spinoza’s understanding of the moderation of affects insofar as a passive affect is only bad for us to the extent that



it connects with other affects in such a way as to inhibit our overall power of acting. When a passive affect is connected so that it counters a more harmful passion, it is actually beneficial for our power of acting. For Spinoza, it is the connection of ideas that determines their value, and the same goes for the experiences that give rise to ideas in the mind. Experiences are simply a raw material, and they have no value until they are transformed into ideas that are connected in such a way as to either strengthen or constrain a person's power of acting. Recalling Spinoza's understanding of good and evil as relative (and perspectival) concepts is useful for capturing this idea. In 4pref he writes: "For one and the same thing can, at the same time, be good, and bad, and also indifferent. For example, music is good for one who is melancholy, bad for one who is mourning, and neither good nor bad to one who is deaf." Similarly, the value of an experience is always relative to (1) the constitution of the person undergoing the experience (by 3p51), and (2) how that experience is connected with other experiences, which in turn will determine whether it is strengthening or hampering for the person's overall power of acting. As Dewey puts it: "The *effect* of an experience is not borne on its face" (1997: 27). Instead, it comes down to the conditioning of a person's habitual responses to external stimuli insofar as "[t]he basic characteristic of habit is that every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes, while this modification affects, whether we wish it or not, the quality of subsequent experiences" (1997: 35).

This brings us right up to the fourth point of contact between Dewey and Spinoza on experience. This concerns the role of the teacher in the face of this knowledge. How can a teacher work so as to ensure (as far as he or she can) that the students are going through experiences that modify them in a way that is strengthening for them rather than hampering? Addressing this question Dewey writes the following:

It sets a problem to the educator. It is his business to arrange for the kind of experiences which, while they do not repel the student, but rather engage his activities are, nevertheless, more than immediately enjoyable since they promote having desirable future experiences.

(1997: 27)

In this quote Dewey is more or less echoing the sentiment of one of Spinoza's commands of reason stating that "[f]rom the guidance of reason we want a greater future good in preference to a lesser present one, and a lesser present evil in preference to a greater future one" (4p66). Going through an unpleasant experience may, depending on the connection of experiences, turn out to be precisely such a lesser present evil that can counter a greater future one. The teacher's role in this context is to make that judgment and to decide whether this is actually the case or not. To be able to do this, the teacher needs to be a rational person guided by rational principles. Part of this entails being able to judge which experiences make for lesser present evils and which will make for lesser present goods. This demands understanding things from the perspective



of long-term rather than short-term benefits, and as Dewey puts it: “It is then the business of the educator to see in what direction an experience is heading” (1997: 38). When we are able to do this, we will be able to make intelligent choices, and this, in turn, is one of the central goals of a Spinozistic conception of education. To make this judgment for another person is not unproblematic from Spinoza’s perspective, however. To an extent, a teacher may influence his or her students to live according to the guidance of reason, but when it comes to the finer aspects of identifying the things that are beneficial for increasing a person’s power of acting, this is conditioned by the particular constitution of that person’s body, and so it is bound to differ from one person to the next.<sup>9</sup>

Setting up situations that require of a person that they practice the art of abstaining from a lesser present good in preference of a future good is, however, one of the things that a teacher may do in order to stimulate the increased understanding of his or her students. To the extent that a Spinozistic education concerns enacting and controlling the environment in this way, it is aligned with social psychology. Since external causes determine us to some degree, it becomes important to find out which external stimuli are less harmful to us than others. This may be found out by manipulating a controlled environment where the teacher guides his or her students through various experiences so that they may come to find out more about themselves and their affective responses through their interactions with different social environments. The desired end result of this process is that the students themselves be competent to judge which social environments they benefit from and which social environments they would do best in avoiding in the future. Steven M. Samuels and William D. Casebeer characterize this experiential understanding or “situational awareness” as follows: “That is, I have changed my own environment so I am able to exhibit the regularities in behaviour I desire, and avoid environments that will disenable my control” (2005: 79). From the perspective of the teacher, even this requires some degree of knowledge of a particular student’s desires (so as to be able to set up situations that are neither overwhelming nor underwhelming for the student), but this appears unavoidable, and to the extent that education is relational I believe that it is reasonable to expect this kind of knowledge from the teacher. As we will come to see in the next chapter, this is also related to the teacher acting as a role model for the student to imitate so as to develop his or her sense of judgment by modeling it after someone with more experience (provided that the teacher in question is guided by reason rather than by passive affects).

Experiences are – by virtue of their epistemological status – notoriously unreliable as sources of information about the world. There is a danger in assuming that the very fact that we experience things renders us capable knowers. One of the problems of student-centered education is that experience is often celebrated as the golden path to knowledge without qualifying what we mean by experience. This is problematic insofar as it does not discriminate between different kinds of experiences and insofar as the very fact that we experience something says very little about what we actually make of that experience. As



Dewey warns us, experience in itself is no guarantee of anything. It requires a good teacher to arrange for a fruitful educational situation where experiences (while being a flawed source of knowledge) can be utilized as stepping stones toward a more adequate understanding of the world. This may appear to be an easy enough task but as Dewey remarks: “To discover what is really simple and to act upon the discovery is an exceedingly difficult task” (1997: 30).

While being flawed as a source of knowledge, it is important to remember that experiences are useful insofar as they are a necessary precondition for acquiring knowledge about the world. Accordingly, as Spinoza tells us in 4p38:

Whatever so disposes the human body that it can be affected in a great many ways, or renders it capable of affecting external bodies in a great many ways, is useful to man; the more it renders the body capable of being affected in a great many ways, or of affecting other bodies, the more useful it is; on the other hand, what renders the body less capable of these things is harmful.

This allows us to experience many things, and by experiencing many things, we learn more about how we respond affectively to different things in the world (4p38d). This understanding, in turn, allows us to – over time – identify which encounters make us joyful and which make us sad. The commands of reason can then help us control our responses so we do not confuse the instant gratification of satisfying temporary wants with the more sustainable joy of increasing our power of acting. It is not that these temporary wants are bad in themselves but that when they are confused with the joy of actually increasing one’s power of acting, they tend to make us strive for joy in a way that can never be sufficiently satisfied. Pursuing riches, for instance, is always associated with a certain degree of mental frustration insofar as we desire something that is external to us and therefore beyond our control. We are then at the mercy of the whims of fortune, and our lives become governed to a great extent by the passions of hope and fear. Coming to understand our affects better, we can reorder ideas so that we consciously desire what we know to be good for us and to avoid the things that are harmful. This way we can consciously strive for things that we can control and that are sustainable, thereby granting us a greater sense of tranquility of the mind.

Spinoza thereby offers a position that cannot be fitted into the brand of abstract rationality that has been routinely criticized in educational debates for its inherent lack of sensitivity to context and for its separation of “rules, procedures and the development of skills and capacities from the *Lebenswelt*” (Derry 2008: 49). Nor can it be reduced to a conception of knowledge where contingency and particularity reigns supreme to the point where meaning-making is always and necessarily culturally specific. Instead, Spinoza is clear about the fact that we always form ideas based on our interaction with external things (allowing us an understanding of how we function in relation to the external world), but that we need to reorder these ideas according to the order of the



intellect by separating our affects from the objects of our ideas so that we can arrive at a more adequate understanding of the causes of our internal changes. It is senseless therefore to either go all in for abstract reasoning in isolation from the world, since this reasoning is always conditioned by external things (ideas and bodies), or for experience alone, since our sensory experiences will not allow us an adequate understanding of the world. Instead, what is required is a well-balanced interplay between paying attention to experiences – allowing us many different angles from where to perceive our own affective abilities – and heeding the dictates of reason – keeping us always reminded of our limited cognitive capacities as finite modes.

### **Understanding natural causes: The art of making intelligent choices**

The problem with most affects of joy that we experience in everyday life is that they are connected with ideas of things that are both unpredictable and transient. They are passive joys. They come and go, and we have little control over them since their cause is external to us. For example, we may experience joy when we fall in love with someone, but if that person leaves us, for whatever reason, the experience of joy will turn into sadness and so our power of acting will be diminished rather than strengthened.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, we may crave a new set of clothes because it brings us joy to dress up in new things, but these will quickly wear and leave us craving yet another set of clothes. We may also crave money to buy new things that we desire, but the joy this brings us is equally short lived and unpredictable. Since love is a “joy, accompanied by the idea of an external cause” and since a property of love is that the lover “wills to join himself to the thing loved” (3DOE 6) it follows that my joy is conditioned by the presence of the thing I love. In sum: if the thing I love is transient, my joy will turn into sadness as soon as the thing transpires.<sup>11</sup> If the thing I love is eternal, however, my love for it will endure, and it will turn out to be as stable and eternal as the thing I love. Such an expression of love, for Spinoza, is the love of God since God is eternal and infinite (5p33). If I can learn to redirect my love from things that transpire to things that endure, I will therefore ensure that my joy persists rather than turns into sadness and pain.

Since all finite things transpire, the challenge is to redirect my love toward things that endure. For this reason, the knowledge and love of God are conceived to be the highest good in Spinoza’s ethical account (5p20d). This love, Spinoza writes, “is the most constant of all the affects, and insofar it is related to the body, cannot be destroyed, unless it is destroyed with the body itself” (5p20s). The scale by which to measure the intelligence of my choices, then, is the sustainability of the things I love and the tenacity with which I love them. Besides bringing a sense of stability to our joy, the love toward God also has the benefit of suppressing the passive affects that transient goods tend to encourage. Money, for instance, tends to give rise to harmful affects such as jealousy because it is generally taken to be a good that is in competition. Hence, in 3p32



Spinoza contends that “[i]f we imagine that someone enjoys some thing that only one can possess, we shall strive to bring it about that he does not possess it.” Since the love of God is available to all in equal measure (4p36), however, it is less likely to be the cause of conflict that money tends to be. Accordingly, in 5p20, Spinoza says: “This love toward God cannot be tainted by an affect of envy or jealousy: instead, the more men we imagine to be joined to God by the same bond of love, the more it is encouraged.” This does not mean that all transient things are bad for us. On the contrary, we have seen that not only are we dependent upon things like food and shelter for our survival, but that things like music and art are actually good for us insofar as they lift our spirit and add to our rational understanding of the world. They are only good for us, however, to the extent that they help us live according to the guidance of reason. When they are framed by a superstitious understanding of the world, they will not have this effect. Instead they will lead to bondage insofar as we begin to strive for things that are inimical to our freedom. Again we see the importance of understanding our sensory experiences according to the order of the intellect. In this way, we can recognize the things that will help us persevere and begin to separate these from the things that will not.

While we might refer to this as the art of making intelligent choices, it does not – as we have already seen – refer to the capacity to make free and unrestrained choices but rather to the mental liberation resulting from understanding and approving of our actions as necessitated. The cultivation of this art is taken to be a central concern for a Spinozistic conception of education. To the degree that a person learns to master this art he or she is taken to gain some degree of influence over his or her state of mental well-being. That is, from Spinoza’s perspective, when we make intelligent choices we may be said to be mentally sound, and when we make poor choices (for whatever reason), we may be said to be afflicted by mental illness. Mental health and mental illness, then, are taken to be relative concepts insofar as they indicate how we are affected by external things, or put differently, insofar as they reflect our degree of understanding of ourselves vis-à-vis external causes. In short, if we take away the external stimuli that cause us to act in ways that inhibit rather than strengthen our power of acting, we have also removed the cause of mental illness in the process. The more control we gain over our affective responses, the more different kinds of situations we can be subjected to without having to fear for our mental health. Fortifying ourselves in this way is therefore central for a Spinozistic conception of education.

When my decisions are guided by the love of God, I will always be inclined to make intelligent choices in this sense. This is so since the love of God is grounded in an adequate understanding of ourselves, not as finite modes caught up in an infinite chain of external causes, but as finite essences following directly from the infinite essence of God or Nature. This understanding will help us distinguish between temporary pleasures and true goods, and so it will be paramount for our successful striving to persevere and to flourish in being. This is also where education may be utilized as an effective means for facilitating this



process. It is important to note that the goal of education is not to rid our lives of temporary pleasures but to enable us to subordinate these temporary pleasures to (and to associate them with) the rational striving to preserve ourselves. The goal of education, from this perspective, is to transform a person's life from a life in bondage, where a person's decisions are guided by desires without having any clear idea of the causes determining him or her, to a life in freedom, where a person's decisions are guided by rational desires that are framed by an understanding of how things follow from their natural causes.<sup>12, 13</sup> The end result of such a transformation is a person who makes intelligent choices and who strives to make others feel and understand things in the same rational way.

From this we see quite clearly how the ability to make intelligent choices pertains to Spinoza's understanding of mental health. The more we can see things from the perspective granted us by an adequate understanding of the causes of changes in us, the more liberated we become from harmful passions that leave us very vulnerable to the capriciousness of fortune and the vacillations of the mind. We are also less likely to be susceptible to superstitions and opinions that would have us act contrary to reason. Mental illness, from this perspective, arises from not understanding natural causes, and as a result not properly understanding one's affective responses.

Having focused on the role of the passive affects in education and on the teacher's capacity to make use of the personal experiences of the students for the purpose of strengthening their understanding, we will now turn to the question of how this plays out in relation to education understood in terms of a deliberative endeavor grounded in the personal striving of the teacher. More specifically, we will see how Spinoza's notion of the imitation of the affects can offer a conceptual bridge between the egoistic striving of the teacher and the teacher's rational desire to aid students in their striving for self-empowerment. We will also see how the interplay between sensory experiences and an increased rational understanding may be approached from the point of view of the association of ideas.

## Notes

- 1 Spinoza establishes as much in 3p51 where he says that "[d]ifferent men can be affected differently by one and the same object; and one and the same man can be affected differently at different times by one and the same object."
- 2 Here Spinoza acknowledges that we have much to learn yet. Accordingly, in 3p2s he concludes that "no one has yet determined what the body can do, that is, experience has not yet taught anyone what the body can do from the laws of Nature alone."
- 3 Similarly, in 2post4 Spinoza writes: "The human body, to be preserved, requires a great many other bodies, by which it is, as it were, continually regenerated."
- 4 I intend to clarify the distinction Spinoza makes between imitation and emulation in the next chapter when we will look closer at how his doctrine of the imitation of the affects pertains to a Spinozistic account of education. In short, however, emulation implies a form of imitation with a purely positive function. Whereas we may imitate things that are not beneficial for us, emulation refers to the imitation of "what we judge to be honorable, useful, or pleasant" (3DOE 33, exp).



- 5 To a degree we may find this out through experimentation. Unless we can ground this information in a rational understanding of how bodies function, so as to have some idea of the actual causes of the changes we undergo, however, we will be none the wiser as to why things happen the way they do, and we will end up simply cataloging effects to no avail as it were.
- 6 LeBuffe writes, for example, that “[b]ondage and evil . . . will be understood in terms of imagination and error” (2010: 8).
- 7 This is not, however, meant to serve as a genealogical exercise establishing the philosophical kinship between Spinoza and Dewey in general. It is merely meant to serve as a way of arguing for the relevance of Spinoza’s thoughts on experience in relation to education by relating them to those of one of the most influential intellectual authorities on the role of experience in education.
- 8 As we will see in the next chapter, this relates to the fact that we tend to desire what others desire as part of what Spinoza labels the imitation of the affects.
- 9 This connects with the fact that sensory impressions give us access to information about the world. Hence, when we are to apply the commands of reason in a given situation, we need to account for that particular situation, and the only way of doing this is through our sensory experiences. Marshall offers a useful clarification with regard to the practical application of the rational principle that we should return hate with love: “Only with some sort of minor premise, however, one that takes a form like ‘*this* is an instance of hate,’ could I conclude that I should return *this* hate with love. And this minor premise is undoubtedly an instance of inadequate knowledge, via perception, so my nature cannot be the only explanation for my action; one must refer to the external situation to explain the action” (2013: 156).
- 10 Spinoza discusses the love of transient things in *KV* 2, ch. 5.
- 11 For an updated psychological account of the relation between the acquisition of transient pleasures and long-term unhappiness see Kesser (2002).
- 12 As Marshall notes, “[a] desire is rational just when its constituent idea is an adequate idea that impacts the conatus so that it moves us to act, thus becoming an active, rather than a passive, affect” (2013: 150).
- 13 To be unaware of the natural causes determining oneself, Spinoza claims, gives rise to a flawed notion of freedom where this ignorance will lead a person to think that he or she is undetermined and free from constraints. Spinoza concludes that “[t]his, then, is that human freedom which all men boast of possessing, and which consists solely in this, that men are conscious of their desire and unaware of the causes by which they are determined” (Letter 58, S: 909).

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## 5 Educational implications of the doctrine of the imitation of affects

This chapter deals with the educational implications of Spinoza's psychological egoism, couched in a discussion on education and emulation. In order to construe a credible theory of education based on this, Spinoza's doctrine of the imitation of the affects is appealed to as it conditions the self-preservation of the individual by the desire to help others in pursuing the same thing. That is, although the desire to teach is ultimately grounded in the egoistic striving to enhance one's own degree of reality, this can only be achieved in a larger community where the individual can benefit from the greater power of a collective sense of striving. This community, it is argued, is championed by the teacher as a moral exemplar and a virtuous role model. This conception of the teacher is one where the teacher is understood to act as an optimistic nutritionist guiding the student through the various temptations on display in the social environment by helping him or her come to see more clearly what is rational to strive for and what is not. Another aspect of this task is to help the student overcome *akrasia* by developing a reliable cognitive link between pleasure and health so the student is habituated into acting on his or her rational desire to persevere in being and so this desire is aimed at things that will certainly benefit self-preservation. The overarching goal of education, then, is to establish a rational community guided by the conscious striving for self-preservation. It is argued that this community benefits from emulation insofar as the behaviors emulated are founded on a rational and scientifically sound self-understanding promoting the flourishing of rational others within the community.

### Education and emulation

Education is always, to some extent at least, about imitation. Typically we may conceive of the student as (at least initially) imitating the teacher's behavior and way of reasoning so as to become more proficient at the subject matter being taught. Or, to use a different example, the student learning to drive may begin by imitating the driving instructor's movements so as to successively learn how to operate the car independently of the instructor. Indeed, this aspect of imitation appears to be an intrinsic part of all learning processes – from the young child learning to speak a language by imitating the people



around him or her to the student learning how to play a musical instrument by imitating the movements of the master teacher and so on. Similarly, moral education may be construed in terms of a relation where the student is striving to emulate the values and virtues of the teacher, who is acting as a role model or a moral exemplar (Kristjánsson 2006). Imitation and emulation, then, are often assumed to occur solely on the part of the student. In a Spinozistic setting, however, the psychological egoism underpinning the ethics of education tends to complicate this image of the student emulating the teacher and not the other way around. In fact, one of the central elements of Spinoza's psychological theory – commonly labeled his doctrine of the imitation of the affects – states that imitation occurs all the time, whether we are aware of it or not, at the level of the affects. Before looking closer at Spinoza's doctrine of the imitation of affects (and of the affective mechanism of association that helps explain this doctrine), it is useful to first place this discussion more firmly in the context of education. This, however, calls for a brief clarification regarding the constraints on the language of education posed by Spinoza's naturalism.

The problem with taking imitation in education as a point of departure for a discussion on Spinoza and education is that Spinoza's causal determinism places considerable constraints on the concepts used. This means that sometimes a concept such as imitation seems to take on a completely different meaning than what we are accustomed to. This is so because it is constrained by other concepts, such as freedom, understood differently from what we would normally expect. As such, the more commonsensical notion of imitation in education is bound up with a more commonsensical notion of freedom. According to this commonsensical understanding, a student may choose to imitate the teacher because to do so is conceived as a means to deliberation in the sense that it is thought to set the student free from various external constraints (such as being dependent on others for his or her survival and general sense of well-being). Being deprived of this version of absolute freedom, in a Spinozistic context, we need to construe a notion of imitation that is compatible with the causal determinism of Spinoza's psychology in the sense that imitation is no more a free choice than raising our arms in defense of a physical assault. The idea that our psychological responses are just as constrained and determined by external causes as our physical bodies are (by virtue of Spinoza's parallelism) has led Marshall (2013) to talk of Spinoza's conception of the human mind in terms of a "spiritual automaton," indicating that the mind obeys the same general laws of nature as everything else (as opposed to it being directed by laws of its own making as it were).<sup>1</sup> There can be no absolute freedom within this conception, but – as explained earlier – only a degree of freedom that is directly corresponding with the degree to which we understand ourselves adequately. Keeping this in mind, we may proceed with our discussion on emulation in education, bearing in mind that when we relate this to a Spinozistic conception of education, we need to take care to submit it to Spinoza's naturalism and the causal determinism that follows from this.



In the context of moral education, it is more common to talk of emulation than imitation. This is because whereas imitation generally denotes the imitation of any behaviors, regardless of their moral value, emulation specifically denotes the imitation of virtuous behaviors. Typically, emulation in moral education is grounded in an Aristotelian understanding. According to Aristotle, emulation is understood as “a good feeling felt by good persons” whereby people “take steps to secure the good things in question.” Emulation, understood thus, is contrasted with envy, which is understood as “a bad feeling felt by bad persons” and denotes a behavior whereby people “take steps to stop [their] neighbour having them [i.e. the good things that we desire]” (Aristotle 1984, 2.II.1388a: 2212). Emulation, then, is grounded in the desire to live virtuously and in the recognition that we need to develop our character so as to accomplish this. Identifying this trait in others, we may seek to imitate them, assigning them the role of moral exemplars guiding us along the road to virtue. Envy, on the other hand, is grounded in the desire to keep others from attaining and holding on to that which we want for ourselves. From a Spinozistic point of view, this is – as we have seen – contrary to reason, as it is grounded in the false belief that true goods are in competition. The virtuous person knows, in contrast, that true goods are available to all in equal measure.

Emulation in moral education is closely linked with the notion of the teacher as a role model. The teacher as role model is founded on the belief that the teacher, by virtue of being a morally well-developed person, can act as a positive role model exhibiting strengths of character that, if emulated by the student, can lead to a more virtuous life. That is, not only is the teacher setting an example in terms of the things he or she chooses to talk about in the classroom, but the teacher’s entire way of living is taken to be a moral exemplar for the student to emulate. In this sense, “the professional role of the teacher cannot be clearly disentangled from the moral qualities of the person who occupies the role, that at every working moment the teacher is indirectly, through conduct and attitude, sending out a moral message” (Kristjánsson 2006: 38). This obviously places considerable demands on the teacher insofar as a good teacher needs to be a good role model – and not simply someone who happens to be proficient at teaching a given subject.<sup>2</sup> As Sanderse has pointed out, however, a lack of attention paid to this aspect of moral education has meant that it “has been taken for granted to such an extent that it has prevented people in both educational theory and practice from enquiring whether modelling can be improved” (2013: 29). Accordingly, the improvement of the understanding of the teacher’s function as a role model appears to be key for construing the role of the teacher in a Spinozistically conceived education.

The way to go about this is to flesh out the concept of emulation so as to better understand how, more precisely, emulation may be utilized in a Spinozistic account of education. One of the problems with uncritically embracing the notion of role modeling in education is, as noted by Kristjánsson (2006), that there is a danger of focusing too much on the role model as a person, rather than on the virtuous character traits displayed by the role model. That is, if the



role model is being idolized, there is a risk of the students uncritically imitating any behaviors displayed by the role model, whether these behaviors are virtuous or not. Rather than focusing on becoming like another person – whoever that person happens to be – the student “must learn to value the ideals embodied in role models because those values are essentially valuable, not merely because the values are enacted by the role models” (Kristjánsson 2006: 41). This can be related to, and substantiated by, the perspectivism (and constructivism) of Spinoza’s ethical theory. Since the things that are good for our striving to persevere differ, to some extent at least, I would do well not to automatically assume that what is beneficial for my role model is also beneficial for me.<sup>3</sup> This is so partly because the role model has acquired a more developed moral character than me – being the student – and therefore responds differently to various stimuli in the social environment. To always act in the same way as the role model, then, may even turn out to be damaging to my ethical striving. Instead of making the students act like him or her “the exemplar should help you to arrive at an articulate conception of what you value and want to strive towards, and to help you find realistic means . . . to that end” (Kristjánsson 2006). In focusing on the affective transformation of the self – rather than on the desire to be like someone else – the teacher as role model is confronted with the task of “trying to evoke in moral learners an inwardly experienced, emotionally driven *demand for self-transformation*, and by reminding them of the . . . message that no one can construct for you the bridge upon which you must cross the stream of life – no one but yourself” (Kristjánsson 2006: 48). Rather than attempting to make students act like someone else (however admirable that person may appear) the challenge of the teacher is therefore to help students develop a sense of judgment that will help them see what is beneficial for them and what is not. One way of doing this is by offering students an example of what a life guided by reason looks like so as to illustrate its many benefits. Another, equally important aspect, is to allow them plenty of opportunities to construct this way of life in a manner that is tailored according to their own specific circumstances and their own particular needs. This touches on the fundamentally therapeutic role of the Spinozistic teacher that we will discuss in more detail later in this chapter, as well as in the next, in relation to LeBuffe’s (2010) notion of the optimistic nutritionist and the image of education geared toward the promotion of mental health and the combating of mental illness.

In highlighting the modeling of the student, Spinozistic education is aligned with two of the major traditions of moral education already discussed briefly in Chapter Three; namely, Aristotelian character education (which provides the setting for Kristjánsson’s discussion above) and a care ethical approach to education. It should come as no surprise that the major difference between the notions of modeling in these accounts and a Spinozistic account comes down to a difference in the understanding of the constitution of the human mind. More precisely, it may be identified in the affective mechanism of association that to a large degree determines the workings of the human mind for Spinoza. In order to see how this is so, we will have to turn to Spinoza’s understanding of association and the



imitation of affects. This, in turn, will help us come to see how Spinoza's psychological egoism fits with an account of emulation in education.

### **The imitation of the affects: Egoism and education revisited**

Della Rocca, having written extensively on Spinoza's naturalistic psychology,<sup>4</sup> argues that Spinoza's doctrine of the imitation of affects helps explain why people who are driven by self-interest are also greatly benefited by acting from benevolence. This, he argues, is not primarily because helping someone will make that person more inclined to help me in return, but because when I help someone in his or her rational striving to persevere in being, his or her increased rationality will be directly beneficial to me in my own striving (since we are similar in nature to the extent that we are guided by reason).<sup>5</sup> The key to understanding this connection, Della Rocca argues, is to be found in Spinoza's doctrine of the imitation of the affects.

In order to grasp more fully the psychological function of the imitation of affects, it needs to be understood in the context of Spinoza's account of the association of ideas. Spinoza introduces the affective mechanism of association in 2p18, where he states that "[i]f the human body has once been affected by two or more bodies at the same time, then when the mind subsequently imagines one of them, it will immediately recollect the others also." As is evident from this quote, the association of ideas is conditioned by the workings of the imagination discussed in the previous chapter. This means that we are, *prima facie*, dealing with a form of inadequate knowledge insofar as this concerns the forming of confused ideas of particular things based on sensory impressions of several simultaneous encounters. As we saw in the previous chapter, however, this does not mean that the mechanism of association (or the imagination more generally) cannot be utilized for the educational purposes of furthering a more adequate understanding and for bringing about an overall increase in a person's power of acting. We will return to the educational merit of taking advantage of Spinoza's associationist doctrine shortly when we deal more specifically with the imitation of affects.

Della Rocca discusses Spinoza's doctrine of the association of mental states (2p18) in terms of *affect transition*. That is, it concerns transition rather than constitution since, as Della Rocca notes, it "occurs when one affect A gives rise to affect B, but neither affect constitutes the other" (1996: 243). Della Rocca gives an example to illustrate his point. The example supposes that I am experiencing two different affects simultaneously: the joy of eating an ice cream and the sadness of watching my favorite team lose an important game. If at a later time I happen to enjoy the same kind of ice cream, this affect of joy will then – via the association of mental states – give rise to the affect of sadness I experienced on the first occasion even though, at this later time, I am not watching a game at all. The joy of eating an ice cream gives rise to an affect of sadness because I associate it with the mental state I was in when I last enjoyed this kind of ice cream. This, in a nutshell, is an example of affect transition via the association of ideas.<sup>6</sup>



In this way we are conditioned to either like or dislike things because we associate them with mental states through affect transition. Hence, “[f]rom the mere fact that we imagine a thing to have some likeness to an object which usually affects the mind with joy or sadness, we love it or hate it, even though that in which the thing is like the object is not the efficient cause of these affects” (3p16). Again, this goes to show that affect transition occurs because we generally have a confused understanding of the causes of our affects, and so we associate certain objects with certain affective changes even though these objects are not the efficient causes of these changes. Even so, the psychological mechanism of association will turn out to play an important role for education since it provides a concrete means by which a mind can be conditioned to love certain things rather than others.

An important feature of the association of ideas is that our past experiences shape our perception of the world around us in a very palpable sense. More importantly, past experiences shape our affective responses to the things and people we encounter. In 2p18d Spinoza illustrates this with a couple of different examples:

And in this way each of us will pass from one thought to another, as each one’s association has ordered the images of things in the body. For example, a soldier, having seen traces of a horse in the sand, will immediately pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a horseman, and from that to the thought of war, and so on. But a farmer will pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a plow, and then to that of a field, and so on. And so each one, according as he has been accustomed to join and connect the images of things in this or that way, will pass from one thought to another.

From an educational perspective, this means that in order to come to understand how and why I associate certain objects or people with certain affective changes, I need to understand how my past experiences have shaped my patterns of association. When I see clearly how these connections are set up I may, with the help of a knowledgeable teacher and through arduous practice, endeavor to reconnect some of these images so that the affects they give rise to are joined with their true causes rather than with that which I falsely imagine it to be, due to the association of ideas. Again, because the association of ideas is construed as a basic psychological function, it is not a pattern that we can ever hope to break with (any more than we can eliminate the passive affects). We can, however, make use of it so as to make it serve our overall striving to persevere and to flourish in being. One way of doing this is through the imitation of affects.

Spinoza introduces the imitation of affects in 3p27 in the following way: “If we imagine a thing like us, toward which we have had no affect, to be affected with some affect, we are thereby affected with a like affect.” This seems to be grounded in the mechanism of the association of ideas, but it introduces a specific form of affect transition based on the notion that we tend to be more easily affected by the things that are like us than the things we imagine we have few things in common with. For example, I tend to feel more sadness when



I perceive the killing of a person like myself than when I perceive the destruction of a chair. The imitation of affects is grounded in this principle of similarity, but more specifically, it introduces the notion that an affect in one individual can give rise to a similar affect in another individual. Affects, then, are – by virtue of the mechanism of association of mental states – contagious. This offshoot of the affective mechanism of association is of particular interest for education. It is particularly interesting since it offers a tangible way by which we may bridge the gap between the self-preservation of the egoistic teacher and education as a collective enterprise geared toward the flourishing of the greater community. To ground the community in self-preservation is highly original on Spinoza's part, and so this offers an exciting opening for educational theory. What sets it apart from other accounts in the history of philosophy is, as Della Rocca puts it, "Spinoza's conception of the way in which self-interest generates a concern for others" (2004: 123). Spinoza's explanation for this hinges on his doctrine of the imitation of affects, and he construes the fact that the imitation of affects gives rise to benevolence as follows:

The good which man wants for himself and loves, he will love more constantly if he sees that others love it (by 3p31). So (by 3p31c), he will strive to have others love the same thing. And because this good is common to all (by p36), and all can enjoy it, he will therefore (by the same reason) strive that all may enjoy it. And this striving will be greater, the more he enjoys this good (by 3p37), q.e.d.

(4p37d2)

My reason for helping others is therefore not primarily that they will be inclined to help me in return but that they – by the very fact that they then exhibit the character traits of a rational person – can come to act as moral exemplars for me to emulate. The Spinozistic teacher, by this account, seeks to turn his or her students into moral exemplars for him or her to emulate, thereby turning both teacher and student into potential role models. This way, we see how imitation is not a one-way street, but that it is construed as an ongoing reciprocal process, where the teacher seeks to inculcate rationality in his or her students so that they, in turn, may come to act as moral exemplars for the teacher to imitate him or herself. As Della Rocca puts it: "The usefulness of the rational others lies not in their inclination to act on my behalf but simply in the example they set for me" (2004: 138).

Besides being an asset to us in our daily lives, the imitation of affects is often a problem for us. This is so insofar as it conditions our own well-being by the well-being of others, whom we imagine to be like us. We are affected by things that happen to people around us, and this can often be both frustrating and distracting since we often fail to live according to the guidance of reason. On the other hand, and especially so when it comes to education, the imitation of the affects may be turned into a powerful instrument for empowering and liberating ourselves collectively. Since the imitation of the affects often serves us well



even if we do not see why this is so, the challenge is to become aware of when and why it is conducive to our self-preservation and when and why it is not. If we become aware of when and why imitation is helpful and when it is not, we gain some degree of influence over our sense of happiness and well-being as we can then begin to manipulate the imitation of the affects to serve our benefits. This, however, requires a proper understanding of affective emulation. It also hinges on how we understand the objects of our desire.

As we saw in the previous chapter, if the object of my desire is something I perceive to be an object that only one person may possess – such as a sum of money or an attractive professional position – then the imitation of affects may give rise to jealousy of the person in possession of the thing I perceive to bring him or her enjoyment. Consequently, it will make me strive to compete with him or her over this sum of money or over the professional position in question (3p32). This is why, as Spinoza notes in 4p37d2 (quoted above), the striving for things that are common to all (i.e., knowledge) is strengthened by the imitation of the affects while things that are in competition (such as money) will have the opposite effect. Striving for things that are in competition will tend to lead to bondage rather than freedom insofar as my life is then being dictated by the whims of fortune, over which I have no real sense of control. If, on the other hand, I come to see that the key to my mental freedom is to love things that are available to all – such as an increased rational understanding of myself and the world – then I will also see that the imitation of affects can be beneficial insofar as it functions to strengthen my desire for acquiring this by linking it with others desiring the same thing. Since the thing I desire is not in competition, my desire for it will be beneficial for other people desiring the same thing, and so we will come to help each other in this joint striving for the same thing.

In 3p31 Spinoza writes: “If we imagine that someone loves, desires, or hates something we ourselves love, desire, or hate, we shall thereby love, desire or hate it with greater constancy.” This introduces a strong argument for acting out of benevolence as my own sense of mental well-being is conditioned by the well-being of those I perceive to be like me. Striving to persevere in my own being thereby becomes intimately bound up with striving to help other people in their striving for self-preservation. This way, when guided by reason, the imitation of affects links our egoistic striving for self-preservation with another person’s striving and, as a consequence, “we will be motivated to pursue the well-being of that individual as well as our own well-being” (Garrett 1996: 303). In itself, the imitation of the affects is neither good nor bad. It simply tells us that we will be influenced by the affects of whoever we imagine to be like us. It can, however, be turned into an advantage insofar as we can utilize it to strengthen our desire for the common good of an increased understanding. Since, as we saw in Chapter Three, kindness and benevolence are necessary conditions for a life guided by reason, it follows that imitating benevolent behaviors serves our striving for self-preservation even when we are not yet conscious of the strong link between benevolence and reason. That is, a life



guided by reason is the primary goal of education, but in order to attain this goal the imitation of benevolence and kindness are necessary stepping stones and important educational means to this end.

Of course, the reciprocity of role modeling presupposes that the student and teacher both are already motivated by a conscious desire for things that will certainly benefit the striving to persevere in being. Since this understanding, in itself, is a goal of education, it becomes clear that the role modeling on the part of the teacher precedes that of the student. That is, it falls upon the teacher to guide the student toward desiring rationality rather than wealth or success for instance. Only once this crucial step is achieved can the teacher benefit from the imitation of the affects. As we have seen, an important aspect of affect emulation is the principle of similarity, and so for the teacher to benefit from the striving of the student, the student must first be made to live according to the guidance of reason. This way, the student and the teacher will become more similar, and the more similar they become, the more they will be prone to imitate one another. This hinges on the notion that “[o]nly insofar as men live according to the guidance of reason, must they always agree in nature” (4p35), and as we have seen above, the more we agree in nature (i.e., the more similar we are), the more likely we are to imitate one another.

This brings us right up to another major challenge facing a Spinozistic conception of education: namely that of how the teacher can act so as to inculcate in his or her students a conscious desire to live according to the guidance of reason. In order to take on this challenge I will turn to LeBuffe’s (2010) model of the optimistic nutritionist for assistance. This, I argue, will help us flesh out the role of the Spinozistic teacher vis-à-vis the rational and ethical development of his or her students. Before doing so, however, let me first say something about the relation between imitation and the process of acquiring judgment and about the teacher as a role model in relation to the question of striving as a collective endeavor.

### **Role modeling and the cultivation of judgment as educational means for establishing the rational community**

Even though imitation, from a Spinozistic perspective, occurs all the time, whether we want it to or not, this does not mean – as we have just seen – that imitation cannot be willfully exploited as a valuable asset to education. Quite the opposite. The cultivation of judgment is a good example of an educational situation where imitation may be exploited for the purpose of enhancing the ethical development of the student. A good sense of judgment, unlike rules (such as the commands of reason), cannot be learned by studying textbooks, but must be conquered through experience and through the imitation of others, more experienced and knowledgeable than oneself. The teacher, having a more developed sense of judgment than his or her students, acts as a role



model for the students to imitate in precisely this way. As Kitchen explains, a judgment

is acquired and developed through imitation of the teacher's tacit implications, which manifest themselves in his or her actions and words. It cannot be pulled apart from the information that it accompanies to be taught in a separate lesson. Information and judgement are taught in the same lessons, but through different teaching mediums. So where information is passed on by means of lists, examples and exercises, judgement is tacitly imparted through the teacher's choice of actions, words and mannerisms, which subtly encourage the pupil to follow his or her lead.

(2014: 138)

This brings us back to the question of role modeling. While the information (in this case the commands of reason) can be imparted in different ways – through a text or through a verbal lesson embellished by vivid examples – the teaching of judgment *requires* that the teacher acts as a role model so as to show how, when and where judgment is applied. This goes well beyond the mere instrumental conveying of rules as it requires an enactment of a life lived according to a sound judgment as well as a life exhibiting strength of character. As Kitchen writes:

In essence, therefore, while the teacher is instructing the pupil under his or her charge in the appropriate information, he or she must consider the manner in which he or she does so, because it is this manner that tacitly imparts a judgement in how the pupil is to use and apply the information to future problems when the teacher is no longer visibly present.

(2014: 139)

It is by observing the role model at work that the student may come to see how one can exhibit strength of character in various concrete situations. For example, the teacher may show how to abstain from a lesser present good in preference to a greater future one. Observing the tenacity displayed by the teacher may then inspire the student to strive for the same thing, especially so once it becomes obvious to the student that the rewards of the greater future good are more sustainable than those of the lesser present good. Another form of strength of character that the teacher may endeavor to display for the student to emulate is nobility, which in Spinoza's understanding complements the self-preservational focus of tenacity with the rational benefits of helping others. Spinoza understands these two aspects of strength of character as follows:

*All actions that follow from affects related to the mind insofar as it understands I relate to strength of character, which I divide into tenacity and nobility. For by tenacity I understand the desire by which one strives, solely from the dictates of reason, to preserve his being. By nobility I understand the desire by which each*



*one strives, solely from the dictates of reason, to aid other men and join them to him in friendship.*

(3p59s)

These two rational desires are good examples of character traits that may be displayed by the teacher as a role model in his or her mode of living. They make for a foundation upon which one may construct a viable theory of education, and as long as things follow from these rational desires, they are aligned with Spinoza's ethics of self-preservation, and they will be of assistance to the student undertaking the arduous journey from bondage to freedom.

The teacher as role model, then, emerges as a crucial aspect of education as this provides a lived example of strength of character for the student to observe and to emulate. While I am in complete agreement with Kitchen about the importance of the development of judgment for the student's ability to make good use of his or her knowledge, I take issue with one aspect of his analysis that I believe to be mistaken. As far as I can tell, Kitchen understands the act of teaching to involve a selfless endeavor to help students deliberate themselves without the teacher expecting anything in return. This brings us back to the problematic notion of the self-sacrificing teacher, discussed more fully in Chapter Three. Kitchen envisions the teacher as role model in the following terms: "The teacher is a selfless beast, offering his or her own insight to ensure that others might avoid errors" (2014: 146). There is no good reason, I would argue, for equating the teacher as a role model with the teacher as a selfless beast. As I hope to have shown above, it is entirely possible to combine teaching through role modeling with the egoistic striving to persevere in existence. In fact, I find the image of the teacher as a selfless beast to be odd as it appears to contradict the very idea of education as a deliberative project. Insofar as the teacher acts as a role model for the student to emulate, and insofar as education is geared to the deliberation of the student, I fail to see how a life in bondage – the bondage of sacrificing one's own striving for the sake of someone else's – is any kind of ideal worth emulating. Instead, Spinoza is clear about the fact that the two aspects of strength of character, tenacity – the egoistic striving to persevere in one's being – and nobility – the striving to help and join with others in friendship – complement one another and that the striving to help others is actually grounded in the rational desire to help oneself. The very desire to help someone else, from Spinoza's point of view, is only rational insofar as it is a kind of striving for self-preservation. In fact, to help others become more like oneself – as with the teacher striving to make his or her students emulate him or her – is the most rational thing to strive for as this will strengthen the power of acting of everyone involved (as well as ensure that the future of the community will not be torn by conflicts of interest). Hence, as Spinoza explains in 4p18s: "To man, then, there is nothing more useful than man. Man, I say, can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of his being than that all should so agree in all things that the minds and bodies of all would compose, as it were, one mind and one body." The notion that the teacher is a self-sacrificing person, then,



seems to imply that for someone (i.e., the student) to flourish, someone else (i.e., the teacher) needs to give something up. Again, this is deeply problematic as it assumes that true goods are in competition. In opposition to this, I have argued – in line with Spinoza – that true goods are in fact equally available to all and that therefore the notion of the teacher as a selfless beast is not only nonsensical (insofar as it is entirely unclear that there are such things as selfless beasts to begin with) but that it is actually inimical to education insofar as the flourishing and deliberation of the student is conditioned by the flourishing and deliberation of the teacher.

In extension, the reciprocal flourishing and deliberation of the teacher and the student becomes a model for the flourishing of the greater community of which they are but a small integrated part. As we have seen, the teacher-student relation concerns a collective form of striving where one part strengthens the other so that the overall community may flourish. As James concludes: “They [the individual humans guided by reason] will strive to constitute a collective body that enhances the power of each of its individual parts” (2014: 157). This joint striving is explained by the doctrine of the imitation of the affects, which, in the case of rational people, ensures that the object of desire is a community that will guarantee the free exchange of ideas so that each part may flourish in his or her striving to persevere in being. This community will function to safeguard the interest of each rational individual striving for self-preservation. In fact, the community is a manifestation of many people joining together in their striving and “[w]hen we manifest our understanding by building the political arrangements on which our individual joy depends, we create a community that functions rather like a body of which we are the parts” (2014: 159). The parallel between maintaining the larger political community and organizing education is something that we will return to and investigate further in the next chapter.

Having established the rational motivation for striving collectively, we will now return to the question of how the role of the Spinozistic teacher is construed more specifically. This will be important for coming to understand the reciprocity between the teacher and the students and between different students helping one another in their striving for self-preservation.

### **Conscious striving for self-preservation: The perspective of the optimistic nutritionist**

In his book *From Bondage to Freedom* (2010), LeBuffe introduces a helpful analogy for describing the relation between *laetitia* (joy) and perseverance in terms of sweetness and nutrition. It is helpful because it paints a distinctly educational picture useful for understanding Spinoza’s conception of conscious striving outlined in 3p28, and for linking this with an account of education couched in Spinoza’s theory of the affects. The above mentioned proposition reads: “We strive to further the occurrence of whatever we imagine will lead to joy, or to avert or destroy what we imagine is contrary to it, *or* will lead to



sadness.” On LeBuffe’s interpretation, this does not mean that we always desire what is good for us (or always succeed in averting what is detrimental for us), however, since “I might, perhaps mistakenly, anticipate *laetitia* in other things and so desire them” (2010: 112). The key to understanding this mistaken view of the good is via the relation between *laetitia*/sweetness and perseverance/nutrition.

Since there is indeed a natural connection between sweetness (such as fruits) and nutrition (as there is between bitterness and poison) we become habituated early on into connecting anything sweet with nutrition. This, however, is an unreliable connotation since it turns out that there are many sweet things (such as candy) that cannot sustain us for very long and that are even harmful for us when we partake of them excessively. Since there is a useful connection between sweetness and nutrition, however, it becomes a matter of distinguishing which kinds of sweet things are truly beneficial for us and which are only seemingly so. Coupled with the fact that we do actually mistake these things is also the fact that we – even though we may know that it is not good for us – still opt for sweet things that are not nutritious insofar as we suffer from *akrasia*, or weakness of the will. Hence, there are two key elements to the relation between sweetness and nutrition that are important to keep in mind when we construe our educational account: one, we often mistake anything sweet for nutrition because we are conditioned to associate sweet things with nutrition in general; and two, we sometimes desire sweet things that are not good for us even though we recognize that they are in fact not. On LeBuffe’s account, the link between sweetness and nutrition can be used as an analogy for the underlying link between the things that we perceive to bring us joy and the things that serve our self-preservation in general, whatever these things may be. Much like with fruits and candy, the ethical enterprise of living a good life becomes bound up with identifying things that are both sweet and nutritious. In educational terms, then, this sets up two related obstacles where the first concerns having the student recognize what is truly good for him or her and to distinguish this from what is only seemingly good, and the second concerns having the student learn to act on this knowledge.

The fact that we commonly mistake what seems good for us (because it may be pleasant for the moment and because we suffer from a confused understanding of our desires) for what is truly good for us sets the stage for one of the most central tasks of the Spinozistic teacher: to act the part of an optimistic nutritionist. This hinges on the notion that since I tend to mistake things that seem good for things that are truly good, I may need the help of an optimistic nutritionist (i.e., a knowledgeable teacher) who can point to the things that are truly good for me and help me come to see the value of desiring these things – being more sustainable goods – rather than the pleasures that, at best, can only ever offer me temporary relief and at worst, may give rise to passive affects like envy and hate. LeBuffe’s analogy of the optimistic nutritionist will help us describe – in more detail – the role of the teacher as someone offering reliable ethical guidance, and thereby assist us in fleshing out the account of how the



egoistic teacher can help his or her students become more like him or herself. LeBuffe summarizes the analogy of the optimistic nutritionist as follows:

Children always try to eat healthy foods, in a way, even though they don't know it. As we all know they hunt around for sweet things to eat, and try to avoid bitter ones. The sweetest things that one can eat continually over a long period of time, though, like oranges and pecans, are really healthy. So, really, unbeknownst to them, they are hunting for healthy foods. *We can help them by showing them which foods really are healthy and convincing them of what is true, that those really are the ones that bring a life full of sweetness.*

(2010: 113, my emphasis)

The notion that children – whether they are aware of it or not – always try to eat healthy foods hinges on Spinoza's conception of self-preservation as a fundamental desire of every finite mode. In determining what will help us persevere in being we will, however, sometimes mistake things that appear to be similar – such as oranges and candy – for one another. Since these things are really quite different, they will not end up having the same effect, and where one thing will aid us in our endeavors, the other will not (at least not in a sustainable sense). The role of the teacher, in this context, is to habituate the student into associating sweetness with nutritious foods rather than with candy. This is done by helping the student come to understand why this is so (i.e., to come to see the truth of it by virtue of a scientific understanding of the world) as well as by exposing the student to different situations where he or she can safely practice this understanding and thereby conditioning him or herself to associate certain objects with certain affective changes. This last part concerns the assumption that if we can alter our cognitive state (by reconfiguring our understanding of some of the objects that we desire) we may also alter our affective state. Della Rocca explains:

The cognitive nature of affects plays a central role in Spinoza's account of the means by which we may destroy harmful affects or at least lessen their deleterious effects. Since a harmful affect – like any other – essentially involves beliefs, thoughts, and so forth, if we are able to alter the relevant cognitive state, we will thereby alter or even destroy the harmful affect.

(1996: 243)

The key to reconfiguring our understanding of the things we desire is bound up with the intimacy with which we understand our affective responses. The more knowledge we gain about how we respond to different things and what our capabilities are given these interactions, the better our understanding is of what we require to persevere in being. Education, then, can come to play an important role for offering young people ample opportunities to discover how they respond affectively to different things and different situations and to frame these experiences in a scientific understanding of natural causation. This, in



turn, can be turned into useful information about what we are like and what is advantageous for our striving to preserve ourselves, information that will be useful later in life when we come across similar situations. This is a crucial step toward attaining freedom of the mind and “[w]ithout a knowledge of what we are like, and thus of what we can and cannot do, we are liable to make damaging mistakes about how to live” (James 2014: 143). This aspect of habituation, where we reorder our ideas so that we associate the sweet and nutritious things with the good but not the sweet but non-nutritious, is connected with the aspect of learning to act on the knowledge that we gain about what is good for us even when we are tempted by the sweet but non-nutritious. By practicing this frequently we may overcome *akrasia* so that we tend to desire the truly good over the seemingly good in most cases.

This may seem simple enough, but from the point of view of education, it entails a heavy workload and plenty of repetitious labor. Since we are surrounded with many different things that can be combined in many different ways, there is no natural limit to the different kinds of affective encounters we can be exposed to (and that we all react differently to). And as already mentioned, even though we always “desire what is advantageous, we do not necessarily know everything that is advantageous” (Kisner 2011: 94). This is where Spinoza’s commands of reason come in handy as they can assist us by giving us a general idea of the kinds of situations that require our most immediate attention as they stand to affect us the most in a negative sense. One such situation is, as we have seen, any situation where we are confronted by the hate of another person. The challenge here is to not respond with hatred – as we are wont to do – but to respond instead with love. We can only do this once we come to see that reason directs us to respond this way as it functions to strengthen our desire for self-preservation, whereas hatred and anger instead will diminish our overall power of acting. Again, this is the kind of situation where we will find that the urge to respond with anger is particularly strong even though we know that it is actually bad for us. Education may help us, however, since it can offer a safe environment for practicing the reordering of ideas under the guidance of a knowledgeable teacher. Since the ability to turn hate into love is difficult to master, however, this training may be best directed at less powerful things, at least initially. In this way we may learn to act on our rational understanding that a greater future good (sweetness *and* nutrition) is more valuable than a lesser present good (sweetness without nutrition) – which corresponds with another command of reason – in situations where we are confronted with mundane dilemmas such as the choice between an orange and a candy bar. This way our ability to make intelligent choices will be gradually strengthened, and so over time we may find that our ability to withstand and overcome stronger passive affects (such as the urge to respond with anger) has been significantly strengthened in the process.

On LeBuffe’s interpretation, the first step toward recognizing what is truly good for our self-preservation is therefore to learn to resist the influence of passive affects that keep us from living according to the guidance of reason. This



is important as the inability to moderate the passive affects will impact every other aspect of learning to desire what is good for me and for acting on this understanding. LeBuffe explains:

[U]nless I overcome the influence of passions, I may err in associating *laetitia* with something other than what increases my power to persevere in being. So resisting passion is itself a means to perseverance. Among such means, however, resisting passion is unique in that it is only by doing so that I may come consciously and rationally to desire perseverance and the other means to it. Performing the first task, then, is a necessary condition for the rational attempt to perform the second.

(2010: 175)

This means that simply teaching someone what is advantageous for him or her (as well as how to distinguish what is advantageous from what is not) is, in itself, no guarantee of anything at all. Unless the teacher helps the student moderate the influence of the passive affects, by working hard on overcoming *akrasia* and on acting on the rational understanding of the relation between sweetness and nutrition, the knowledge of what is advantageous becomes nothing more than a painful reminder of what I could have but somehow fail to attain. The teacher can do this by acting as a role model – effectively showing the benefits of living according to reason – and by setting up suitable challenges for the student to overcome. Another important tool for the teacher in this task is the promotion of a scientific understanding of the world as this will help strengthen a more rational response to external influences.

As we will see in the next chapter, however, it is crucial that these challenges are well adjusted to the development of the student. If the challenge is too great, the student will most likely not be motivated to overcome it, and if it is not enough of a challenge, he or she will not maximize his or her potential. Put differently, when the challenge is too great, this simply means that the student is being overpowered and that the striving to persevere is hampered rather than strengthened. When there is not enough of a challenge, this means that the student will not need to work on fortifying the link between sweetness (joy) and nutrition (perseverance) in increasingly difficult situations. And so while this link may be established in some situations (where the challenge is relatively easy to overcome), it will not be established in others (since they demand more practice and a more developed rational understanding of natural causation). This requires that the teacher uses his or her judgment wisely and so for the student to learn to develop a keen sense of judgment, the teacher needs to act the part of a role model illustrating how the judgment is applied so that the student can imitate this in turn.

An important aspect relating to the student's imitation of the teacher is the benefits of working in a group so that the imitation of affects can be fully taken advantage of for the benefit of strengthening the individual student's desire to persevere in being. As we saw earlier, the imitation of the affects functions to



strengthen my desire by joining it with others who I imagine to be similar to me. In an educational setting, the teacher can take advantage of this natural tendency to imitate others by working with a group of individuals who may not be exactly the same, but who are sufficiently similar for the imitation of affects to spur them on in their endeavors to strive to persevere and to flourish in being. Education, on this account, can be made to feed off the imitation of the affects insofar as “[s]eeing someone else who loves virtue and desires knowledge will make me love and desire virtue and knowledge all the more” (Nadler 2014: 53). This, of course, presupposes that the context is such that the teacher has already successfully instilled in his or her students a budding love and desire for virtue and knowledge. It also means that while the educational process may be initially centered on individuals learning to emulate one another and to develop their rational understanding of natural causation, once this process is underway the role of the group becomes increasingly more important as it means that more and more individuals (who have become gradually more like one another) are able to join in the striving for the same thing.

### **The therapeutic aspects of a Spinozistic education**

In influencing the students to abstain from the immediate gratification of the candy bar in preference to the sustainable nutrition of the orange, the teacher’s role is not unlike that of a therapist overseeing the cognitive training of his or her patients. Even though Spinoza’s ethical project is formulated in terms of a fundamentally self-therapeutic endeavor, there is clearly need for a teacher or guide overseeing the process of self-therapy, offering support and setting up challenging obstacles, acting the part of the role model and coordinating the different individuals of the group so that their desires coincide in the rational striving for increased understanding, empowerment and freedom. As we have seen, this work contains elements of social psychology – demanding that the teacher manipulates the environment so that the students may develop their understanding of their affective responses to external stimuli in different environments – and it contains elements of repetitious cognitive training – where each student endeavors to reorder ideas in light of his or her understanding of the affects, thereby learning to separate affects from thoughts of external causes (5p2) and hence, to destroy dangerous passive affects (5p2d). The analogy of the optimistic nutritionist provides a good practical example of how this therapeutic training may be staged, focusing on overcoming seemingly small and inconsequential obstacles where working to habituate oneself so as to connect the sweet with the nutritious (i.e., joy with self-preservation) is a way of learning to resist the passive affects that, once automated, can be applied in many other kinds of situations as well. This process may be described in terms of the gradual building of a mental defense against socially spread ills, such as greed, envy and hatred. By learning to associate sweet things with nutritious things, students learn to associate the good with the empowering and this, in turn, will condition them to desire more things that bring joy and that empower them



simultaneously. Using this kind of training to extensively affect our imagination (by 5p10s), by associating sweet things with nutritious things in an environment that poses no serious threat to us, can function by readying us for more challenging psychological encounters in the future, thereby strengthening our degree of mental health.

The importance of training cannot be overstated in this context. The reasons for this have to do with the ever-present dangers of succumbing to *akrasia*. Since it isn't enough to simply recognize what is good for us, as this cannot guarantee that we act on this knowledge, we face the challenge of not letting passive affects dictate our behaviors whenever we are confronted with powerful passive affects. We suffer from *akrasia* – weakness of will – when we understand that something would be good for us (such as eating a carrot) but in spite of this knowledge do something that is not (such as eating a candy bar). One reason for this, according to Spinoza, is that the pleasure we derive from a lesser present good (sweetness) is stronger than the pleasure we derive from the greater future good (health). The reason for this, in turn, is that we tend to be more easily moved by things that are present than by things that are not present (4p9). This is so because, as Marshall notes, “an affect concerning something present will be more powerful than that affect taken not to be present, because the latter has an accompanying negating idea that decreases its power” (2013: 181). This happens because our imagination takes the affect that is not present to be contingent (less real) while it takes the present affect to be necessary (more real). This, however, is a misconception caused by our limited understanding of the world, and if we were to understand things according to the order of the intellect (from the perspective of God or Nature) we would see that both things are equally necessary (real) and we would then be in a position where we could choose the greater future good over the lesser present one. Hence, Spinoza's proposition stating that: “From the guidance of reason, we seek that greater future good before the lesser present one and the lesser present evil before the greater future one” (4p66). From this perspective we would therefore be in a position to always act in accordance with what is truly good for us:

If the mind could have adequate knowledge of a future thing, it would be affected toward the future thing with the same affect as it would toward the present thing (4p62). So, insofar as we attend to reason itself, as in this proposition we have supposed ourselves to do, the thing is the same whether the greater good or evil is supposed to be future or present. So therefore (4p65), we want a greater future good before a lesser present one, etc.  
(4p66d)

It is important to highlight this aspect since it will come to influence the behavior of the teacher. If the teacher assumes that education is primarily concerned with imparting information about what is good and what is not – through the commands of reason – and to oversee the striving of the students, he or she is bound to be frustrated whenever the students fail to act on this information.



Since students – like people in general – are generally determined by passive affects to a high degree, they will find that their ability to act on the knowledge of the good is often quite limited. This is so since the good they strive for is not present (and therefore tend to be weaker), while the pleasures they seek to abstain from often are (and therefore tend to be stronger). With a clear knowledge of this, it should come as no surprise that the training process will indeed be very cumbersome and that the students will inevitably fail to act on the knowledge of the good time and time again. This is another reason for starting out with relatively simple challenges so as to gradually come to affect the imagination and to imprint on it the associative pattern connecting sweetness with nutrition and health. It is also a very good reason for studying nature scientifically so as to come to see that things act according to certain laws of nature regardless of whether we perceive of them as present (more real) or distant (less real).

This amounts to a valuable pedagogical insight because it means that the teacher needs to exhibit a great deal of patience and a great deal of determination in his or her daily work with the students. Patience is important so as not to succumb to fits of anger and disappointment, emotions sometimes evoked by the misconception that students fail to act on the knowledge of the good because of lack of will-power or because of spite. Instead they fail to act on it simply because they are being overpowered by more powerful passive affects. That is, they have no real choice in the matter. Coming to understand this, the teacher may overcome his or her own desire to respond with anger since it becomes clear that the notion that the student is being willfully defiant is simply inadequate. Instead, the teacher can focus on helping the student build a rational defense against dangerous passive affects – by reordering ideas – so that the student's resistance against passive affects is gradually strengthened. Determination is equally important because this is required by the teacher as a role model – whose job it is to illustrate how to overcome *akrasia* through continuous training – and because the teacher needs to be able to subject his or her students to painful experiences in the instances where they tend to seek out excessive pleasures that are not conducive to the successful striving for self-preservation.

This brings us back to the discussion in Chapter Three regarding moral responsibility. The discussion on *akrasia* highlights an interesting aspect of the question of responsibility in Spinoza. Students who are determined to a great extent by passive affects tend to do things that are not good for them insofar as they are being overpowered by external causes (such as the pleasure of eating the candy bar or the envy of the wealthy and successful neighbor). The key to remember here is that they are *overpowered* by passive affects and caused to do things by causes external to them. As we have seen, to be free – for Spinoza – is to be self-determined and to cause oneself to act. When we cause ourselves to act, we act in accordance with our nature (i.e., we understand our behavior from the perspective of a full causal chain and need therefore not suffer from a lack of understanding of why things happen the way they do). Whenever our



actions stem from external causes, on the other hand, we are unfree (i.e., we are then caused to act by something other than ourselves and we are therefore at a loss as to why things happen the way they do). The student suffering from *akrasia*, then, is being caused to act by powerful passive affects even though he or she recognizes the error of his or her actions. In terms of responsibility we may therefore say that the student being overpowered by passive affects acts not on his or her own accord, but is rather determined to act that way by external causes. Consequently, the student is not responsible for his or her actions. If, on the other hand, a student is the cause of his or her own actions – by understanding things adequately – he or she may be said to be responsible. Students who act virtuously – in that they act in accordance with the understanding that it is good to strive for self-preservation – are responsible for their actions as they are the cause of their actions. Students who fail to act virtuously, however, are not responsible as they are not the cause of their actions. Recognizing this, the teacher can endeavor to explain the mechanism behind this rather than placing blame on the student for not acting in accordance with the good. In understanding that powerful passive affects can only be overcome by more powerful affects (and not through some poorly understood faculty labeled will-power), the student may begin to endeavor to understand more about his or her affects so as to be able to counter powerful passive affects rather than simply lamenting the inability to do the right thing. Accordingly, in 5p3c Spinoza writes: “The more an affect is known to us, then, the more it is in our power, and the less the mind is acted on by it.”

As we have seen in Chapter Four, we learn about our affects through experience, through acting on and being acted on by many things so as to find out what we are capable of given different circumstances. This way we can come to understand ourselves by way of other things, finding out which things we agree with and which things we do not agree with, so as to construe a reliable map of our affective capabilities. Similarly, regular physical training and exercise can be a good way of getting to know one’s body by interacting with other bodies. This way, we can build up a resistance to the influence of external bodies, and we can gain in strength by joining with bodies that strengthen us rather than break us down. Through this physical training, a person can learn to overcome difficult challenges by coming to experience the rewards of overcoming resistance, such as the satisfaction of becoming gradually stronger and more enduring. An important aspect of this, however, is to understand what makes us stronger. We reach this understanding, as we have seen, by understanding natural causation. When we gain this kind of understanding – by learning more about the world (through studying physics, chemistry, biology, etc.) and how we are affected differently by different things in the world – we gain in power as we come to see more clearly why our bodies respond the way they do to different things. This way the mind, paralleling the body, is simultaneously affected and becomes strengthened and increasingly resistant to external influences in a similar fashion. This is important as it highlights the corporeality of a Spinozistically conceived education. That is, a student will not develop morally by



simply contemplating the good life. Instead the good life must be continuously tried out for size. The student must experience many things so as to find out how he or she responds to them, and whether these things have a strengthening or weakening effect. They must be allowed to experiment as these things (i.e., the things that empower the body and the mind)— differ from person to person. Being guided by a rational understanding of how things interact (according to the laws of nature) and how things are affected by interaction is a necessary precondition for gaining any kind of useful insight from these experiences however. This goes to highlight the importance of studying the world scientifically so as to be able to make use of this scientific understanding when shaping a moral character for oneself. Without this knowledge, there is nothing to guarantee that our concept of the good is actually modeled after a reliable understanding of what is beneficial for our striving for self-preservation. Throughout this process, the teacher must provide a steady guide, warning against the constant dangers of *akrasia* and encouraging the student's endeavors to overcome dangerous passive affects in their quest for freedom and understanding.

We are now in a position to see the benefits of applying the analogy of the optimistic nutritionist to the teacher as well as perceiving the strong link between the therapeutic aspects of a Spinozistic education with the importance placed on studying the natural world scientifically. Given the natural limitations of the scope of human understanding (as addressed in Chapter Two), and the inevitable influence of the passive affects (as discussed in Chapter Four), it appears that the teacher as optimistic nutritionist can act as a support, helping the student come to see the relation between sweetness and perseverance by moderating the passive affects and thereby becoming more active. This hinges on the notion that

where a mind is active, it will understand what it is that correlates *laetitia* and the aversion of *tristitia*, namely perseverance and its means, so it will seek them. Such a mind, having adequate ideas, will understand its own nature as a thing that strives to persevere in being. Where a mind is passive, however, its consciousness of striving may not be veridical, so it may not associate *laetitia* with perseverance in being and may associate it with other things.

(LeBuffe 2010: 122)

Helping the students become more active, the teacher is at the same time endeavoring to shape them into potential role models to emulate in the conscious striving for self-preservation. As we have seen above, this is conditioned by the imitation of the affects, stipulating that the desire of the teacher is strengthened by joining with the desire of others taken to be similar in nature. Part of this concerns linking the experience of joy with the striving to persevere in being. Since everyone experiences joy in slightly different ways, depending on the constitution of the particular body/mind, this requires an educational process of mapping out the affective responses of the individual student vis-à-vis



external stimuli of different kinds. This process is geared for identifying, with more precision (i.e., scientific accuracy), the element of experienced joy “that corresponds to the attainment of the good, an increase in the power to persevere” (LeBuffe 2010: 142). In this sense, the teacher as optimistic nutritionist may help compensate for the fact that “the natural mechanism for perseverance is limited” by helping students “improve upon it by understanding and remaining cognizant of [their] own natures” (LeBuffe 2010). On this view, the purpose of education is to adequately come to know how we are constituted so as to find out what is advantageous for our striving to preserve and to perfect ourselves. That is, education is about learning to recognize the objects of our striving with more precision – by understanding and reordering the affects – so as not to mistake something harmful for something beneficial. This, as we have seen, hinges on our ability to understand how we are constituted (physically, chemically, biologically, etc.) so as to be able to make this understanding serve our ethical striving for self-preservation. Accordingly, a Spinozistically conceived education combines the therapeutic aspects of character education with a rigorous scientific approach to the natural world, where our ability to understand what is good for us is always grounded in an adequate understanding of natural causation.

Part of this process, as touched upon earlier in this chapter, is connected with not only recognizing the good but – just as importantly – acting on the good. In the instances where students suffer from *akrasia*, and are overpowered by passive affects that keep them from desiring self-preservation and instead have them pursuing joys that end up making them passive rather than active, education may very well turn out to involve painful experiences insofar as abstaining from temporary pleasures may be both frustrating and hard. In order to prepare students for the challenge of submitting to lesser pains so as to avoid greater pains, it is therefore suggested that the teacher must find ways of offering the right amount of resistance. This aspect of teaching – where education serves to help students gradually overcome the tendency to seek to avoid lesser present pains at the cost of submitting to greater future pains – will provide the framework for the coming chapter on teaching as the art of offering the right amount of resistance.

We will begin the next chapter by investigating the parallel between the role of the state and the role of the teacher, thereby reconnecting with the discussion initiated in Chapter Three concerning the relation between the body of the individual student and the greater social body of which it is a part. This, in turn, will set the stage for an informed discussion on teaching and authority, where it is suggested that the teacher, besides being required to act the part of a role model and an optimistic nutritionist, is also called upon to act the part of the sovereign of the classroom, whose task it is to coordinate the wills of the different students in the group into a unified will expressing the rational striving for self-preservation and empowerment. In the next chapter it is also time to deepen our as of yet rough understanding of Spinoza’s views on mental health and mental illness insofar as these concepts pertain to education and



to the educational aims of Spinoza's therapeutic project. As an example of a relevant contemporary problem that Spinoza's cognitive training might address and help shed some light on, we will turn to the timely question of the student as consumer, which will bring us back to the problem of *akrasia* in education.

## Notes

- 1 This is grounded in Spinoza's naturalism stating that "the laws and rules of Nature, according to which all things happen, and change from one form to another, are always and everywhere the same" which means that "the way of understanding the nature of anything, of whatever kind, must also be the same, namely, through the universal laws and rules of Nature" (3pref).
- 2 For an extended discussion on the importance of quality of character in teachers the reader is referred to David Carr's 'Character in teaching' (2007).
- 3 For a related discussion on the problems with imitating people who are significantly more morally and rationally developed than oneself see Daniel Garber's "Dr. Fischelson's dilemma" (2004: 193–195). A relevant conclusion of Garber's discussion is that "[w]e must distinguish between the character that is our aim and goal, and the character that we must emulate in order to attain that goal" (196).
- 4 Della Rocca discusses Spinoza's psychology at length in Chapter Four of his book *Spinoza* (2008) and in "Spinoza's metaphysical psychology" (1996a). He specifically develops his views on Spinoza's imitation of the affects in the article "Egoism and the imitation of affects in Spinoza" (2004).
- 5 For an informed discussion on Spinoza's understanding of benevolence as grounded in the rational striving to persevere in being, see Nadler (2014).
- 6 This is related to the notion that all mental activities are representational for Spinoza. That is, as we saw in Chapter One, even emotions such as love or fear that we normally take to be non-representational modes of thought are representational for Spinoza insofar as they are always connected with an idea of a thing toward which the emotion is directed. Spinoza establishes this in 2a3 where he says that: "There are no modes of thinking, such as love, desire, or whatever is designated by the word affects of the mind, unless there is in the same individual the idea of the thing loved, desired, and the like." Our ability to influence our affective responses is therefore intimately connected with the extent to which we can reconnect our emotions and the ideas of the objects we associate with these emotions as discussed in Chapter Two with regard to the reordering of ideas.

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## 6 Teaching as the art of offering the right amount of resistance

This chapter looks closer at Spinoza's political philosophy as this connects with an educational notion of balancing resistance. It discusses the double role of education in relation to the double role of Spinoza's conception of the state: to moderate and restrain harmful passive affects and to maximize the degree of freedom of the individual within the limits of the state. The parallel between the governance of the state and the governance of the classroom, in turn, calls for a discussion on teaching and authority and on indoctrination and education. It is concluded that the Spinozistic teacher functions as a therapist of sorts, helping the student overcome harmful passive affects that stand in the way of a more long-term sense of happiness. In doing so it returns to one of the central themes of this book, namely the notion that a Spinozistic education may be conceived as a way of combating mental illness.

### **The role of the state and the role of the teacher: Moderating passive affects and maximizing freedom**

In his political writings – the *Theological-Political Treatise* and the unfinished *Political Treatise* – Spinoza outlines his conception of an ideal state in terms of a peaceful and secure domain aiming at promoting and safeguarding the free exchange of ideas and at maximizing the freedom of the people. As Steinberg (2013) notes, however, Spinoza's conception of peace differs from the Hobbesian notion, where peace denotes the mere absence of war, in that it is taken to consist in “a virtue which comes from strength of mind” (*TP* Ch. 5.4/S: 699) and “a union or harmony of minds” (*TP* Ch. 6.4/S: 701). Where the absence of peace may be achieved through coercion and through the domination and intimidation of the multitude, Spinoza's understanding of peace requires a commonwealth made up of people living in harmony, enjoying the freedom to philosophize. People joining one another in an endeavor to live according to the guidance of reason and to strive for increased understanding and empowerment are the building blocks of Spinoza's ideal state. Spinoza explicates:

But be it noted that in speaking of the state as being established to this end [of promoting peace and security], I meant one established by free people,



not dominion over a people acquired by right of war. For a free people is led more by hope than by fear, while a subjugated people is led more by fear than by hope; the former seeks to engage in living, the latter simply to avoid death. The former, I say, seeks to live for itself, the latter is forced to belong to a conqueror; hence we say that the latter is a slave, the former is free.

(*TP* Ch. 5.6/S: 699–700)

Since, as we have seen, human beings are finite modes and can therefore never hope to be completely free, but can only reach a degree of freedom insofar as they escape the bondage of the passive affects (and become more self-determined), there appears to be a problem with positing a state made up of entirely free people. People will always be more or less subjected to irrational fears and superstitions insofar as they are always partly determined to act by passive affects. This introduces a problem for Spinoza insofar as the ideal state appears to be an unattainable ideal from the perspective of humans, much like the ideal of the free man is for the individual person (as discussed in Chapter One). Hence, Spinoza is forced to draw the following conclusion:

Now if human nature were so constituted that men desired most of all what was most to their advantage, no special skill would be needed to secure harmony and trust. But since, admittedly, human nature is far otherwise constituted, the state must necessarily be so established that all men, both rulers and ruled, whether they will or no, will do what is in the interest of their common welfare; that is, either voluntarily or constrained by force or necessity, they will all live as reason prescribes.

(*TP* Ch. 6.3/S: 701)<sup>1</sup>

This serves to illustrate the double role of the state as envisioned by Spinoza. On the one hand, the purpose of the state is to serve as an extension of the individual human being guided by reason, insofar as it strives for self-preservation and empowerment. This aspect of the state is geared for maximizing the freedom of the individual humans that make for its constituent parts. Remember that Spinoza's understanding of an individual (discussed in Chapter One and Chapter Three) applies to the body/mind of the individual human as well as to the body/mind of the state. Both individuals are made up of smaller bodies, and both individuals strive to maintain a stable ratio of motion and rest among its many parts. From this it follows that the freedom of the state is conditioned by the freedom of its individual parts (and vice versa).

On the other hand, given the fact that humans are always to some extent guided by passive affects, it is also the purpose of the state to moderate these and to enforce laws that keep people from acting contrary to reason by causing one another harm (and by harming others that are like them, harming themselves).<sup>2</sup> According to the parallelism of the body/mind of the individual human and the body/mind of the state, this means that the state needs to protect itself from being harmed by passive affects in much the same way as the individual



human needs to protect him or herself from being harmed by passive affects. One way of doing this is to posit rules safeguarding the safety and peace of the community. These rules function like moral guidelines, and in this sense they correspond with the dictates of reason guiding the individual human in the face of the danger of being overpowered by harmful passive affects.

The two roles of the state are not contradictory, however. Instead, they both aim at the same thing: namely, the construction and maintenance of a community guided by reason. The reason for constructing this community is because the power of the individual human is inherently limited, and the more individuals join in the same striving, the more powerful that striving becomes. The dangers of the passive affects threaten this joint striving, however, and so in order to safeguard the striving of the community (and through this, the striving of the individual human) the state needs to posit rules that act as preemptive measures, compensating for the natural inability of individual humans to withstand the influence of harmful affects. These measures become effective when harmful passive responses overpower rational responses. Again, the ability to strike a balance between maximizing freedom and repressing irrational behaviors is a task for the individual human in the same way as it is the task for the state. This is so since the danger posing the greatest threat to the well-being of the individual human and the well-being of the state is also the same, namely the inability to recognize and to act on the knowledge of the good.

There is a clear parallel between the establishment of a rational community through the authority of the state and the establishment of the Spinozistic classroom via the authority of the teacher. Much like it falls upon the state to “strike the proper balance between being too repressive and not repressive enough” (Della Rocca 2008: 214), it falls upon the teacher to balance the level of repression in the classroom. While this may seem dangerously close to a scenario where the teacher governs the classroom by rule of fear, this would clearly be a misinterpretation. The goal of the teacher, as well as the goal of the state, is always to promote the freedom of the students (being the citizens of the classroom). Since freedom, for Spinoza, is the same as understanding things rationally, this does not, however, amount to doing whatever we please since we may well be mistaken about what is rational and what is not. As we have seen, when our actions are determined by passive affects, we are not strictly speaking responsible for them (since their causes are external to us) and so, in Spinoza’s understanding, we need help in coming to understand our affects so we may become the causes of our actions and thereby also become responsible for them. It is not, then, the role of the teacher (or the role of the state) to place blame on students for not acting according to reason or coercing them into complying with the demands of the teacher for fear of being punished. Instead, knowing that students are often overpowered by passive affects, it is the role of the teacher to recognize this and to guide students so they stand a better chance of countering these affects with a rational understanding of themselves and their affective responses to external influences. This will, as we will discuss in more detail in the next section and throughout the rest of this chapter, involve an aspect of



offering resistance, but not for the purpose of creating docile and obedient students. Instead, the purpose of offering resistance is to allow the students an opportunity to practice on overcoming harmful passive affects in a manner that is well adjusted to their individual constitution and to their particular level of moral development as well as to a rational understanding of the nature of the world. Part of this involves coming to understand that acting in ways that cause harm to others is inimical to the egoistic striving to persevere in being, however pleasurable these acts may appear for the moment. This is so since the path to individual freedom depends on civil society, and so without the latter there can be no viable sense of freedom for the individual (Steinberg 2013).

As indicated in Chapter Three, it is useful to compare the role of the teacher to the role ascribed to the sovereign in Spinoza's political philosophy. On this analogy, the teacher has the right (which, in Spinozistic terms, is coextensive with his or her power) to inculcate in the students a desire for complying with the rules established by the teacher. If these rules are aligned with their natural desire to strive for self-preservation and flourishing, they will be likely to come to see the benefits of living according to them. If they are not, however, they are likely to rebel and the teacher will lose the authority to act as their rightful teacher. Curley describes this process with regard to the power of the sovereign:

The sovereign's right will depend on his power to persuade his subjects (in one way or another) that it is in their interest to obey. If they believe that, they will obey (and the sovereign, in virtue of his power, will command with right). If they do not, then no matter what promises they may have made, they will not obey (and he, in virtue of his lack of power, will cease to be the sovereign).

(1996: 324)

This means that much like with the state, the classroom is organized around a form of social contract binding students and teacher alike to comply with the commands of reason. Should the students fail to honor this contract, the teacher will need to work harder at showing them the value of reason and the correspondence between sweetness (joy) and nutrition (perseverance) (as discussed in the previous chapter). Should the teacher not respect it, he or she will no longer live up to the standards of a moral exemplar and will therefore risk losing the authority as teacher. As Hannah Arendt points out, "where force is used, authority itself has failed" (1993: 93).

The governing of the classroom, as well as the governing of the state, rests on two parallel assumptions. The first is that the cultivation of reason is the best way to secure peace and comfort for all. The second is that while the desire for self-preservation comes naturally, this desire is not automatically connected with the conscious striving for an increased rationality. When guided by passive affects, people commonly tend to seek things that are inimical to their flourishing (such as wealth, revenge and fame), believing these things to constitute the goods they desire. In these cases, it is the task of the teacher (and the



state) to motivate the students to desire increased rationality by illustrating how this constitutes a greater good than the transient things commonly mistaken for true goods. Insofar as students do not recognize the goods they desire, the teacher needs to illustrate the value of an increased rationality, and in this the teacher may be inclined to resort to what appears to be the indoctrination of his or her students.<sup>3</sup> This dual approach to teaching – as the task of helping students strive for increased understanding and freedom (once they appreciate the value of this) and of showing them the value of increasing their rational understanding of themselves and the world (in the cases where students are greatly determined by passive affects) – corresponds roughly with Spinoza's conception of the very different functions of philosophy and religion. Nadler explains:

Philosophical propositions are assessed according to their truth-value; true theories expand our understanding of the world and ourselves. The propositions of religion are assessed according to their piety and motivational value; they are supposed to inspire in us a love of God and ethical behavior toward others.

(2011: 182)

Philosophical propositions, on this account, are only useful insofar as we already recognize the value of increasing our rational understanding of ourselves and the world. In a situation where this is not the case, Spinoza recognizes the value of religion, functioning as a kind of popular fiction geared for facilitating an outwardly moral life even when the nuts and bolts of this morality are not yet properly grasped. Respecting the moral value of benevolence (because religion teaches us to do so) thereby ensures the peace and stability of the community even when some of its members have not yet come to see the truth-value of benevolence as a means by which we may increase our own power of acting. This way the people who do not yet understand the truth-value of philosophical propositions pose less of a threat to those who do than they would if they were to unrestrictedly pursue the things they desire at the expense of the peace and comfort of their fellow humans.

The notion that those who do not recognize the true value of reason as a moral virtue need to be manipulated into behaving in a way that complies with a moral way of life (so as to not interfere with those that do understand and appreciate its value) obviously raises the concern of indoctrination in education (as indicated above). This, of course, is a concern that seems to be relevant in relation to the discussion on education in general, whether this educational program is conceived to be Spinozistic or not. Randall Curren (2007), writing from the point of view of virtue ethics, argues that the problem of indoctrination is at the core of moral education. The dilemma, as Curren perceives it, is that there is a tension between inculcating in the young a concept of the good and at the same time maintaining a moral community open to the critical scrutiny of its members. Since “children become neither good nor responsive to reason without an upbringing that surrounds them with good models and



guides them toward good habits” (Curren 2007: 510) they will shape their notion of the good in accordance with this. This means that “what we have been habituated to in our youth tends to exercise an *enduring* influence on what we desire and perceive to be good” (Curren 2007), which implies that it is therefore extremely difficult to challenge this moral knowledge at a later point.

The tension between manipulating children into engaging emotionally with moral fictions so as to become moved by the underlying morality of these fictions (without actually understanding this morality rationally yet) and indoctrinating students into adopting a position marked by docility and passivity is undoubtedly at the heart of moral education. This is a tricky question, and striking the balance between brain-washing children through emotional manipulation and offering little or no tangible guidelines for moral thought is obviously no easy feat. Hard as it is, this becomes a central task for the teacher. Discussing Spinoza’s conception of the role of religion for shaping law-abiding and ethical citizens, Charlie Huenemann turns to education as an illustrative example of how this balancing act may be conceived:

Younger students need to be prepared for what they will learn later, and sometimes this preparation means cultivating the right attitudes and values through imaginative and emotional appeals. We share with them inspiring but simplified and less-than-truthful stories of overcoming adversity, fighting evil forces, heroic action, and so on. Our overarching goal in this case is not merely obedience, but, finally, reasoned and autonomous endorsement of the values we have tried to instill in them with myths and stories. In this way, education aims ultimately at strengthening the individual, not brain-washing or enslaving them.

(2014: 127)

As Spinoza evidently shares the Aristotelian understanding that children and young people need to be molded into moral beings (even if this requires emotional manipulation), it would seem that this concern is very much relevant for the purpose of developing a credible account of a Spinozistic education. There is a crucial difference between a Spinozistic and an Aristotelian understanding, however, in that Spinoza does not recognize the objective reality of moral knowledge. As we have seen, the only foundation of virtue for Spinoza is the striving for self-preservation (4p22c), which holds true for any finite mode, whether human or otherwise. Beyond this, moral knowledge depends on how we experience and interact with the world individually. That is, our concept of the good needs to be cultivated through experience (preferably guided by reason and sharpened by a sound scientific understanding of natural causation). Having experienced few things, we will have little knowledge about what things are conducive to our striving to persevere and what things are inimical to it. Education, on this account, is therefore not about inculcating a set of fixed concepts of good and evil, but rather about coming to construct a productive concept of the good through embodied experience and under the



guidance of a scientific understanding of the world. Spinoza describes this well in a scholium that Lloyd (1998) identifies as a key passage expressing Spinoza's core views on the transformative power of education:

And really, he who, like an infant or a child, has a body capable of very few things, and very heavily dependent on external causes, has a mind which considered solely in itself is conscious of almost nothing in itself, or of God, or of things. On the other hand, he who has a body capable of a great many things, has a mind which considered in itself is very much conscious of itself, and of God, and of things.

(5p39s)

As we saw in Chapter Four, the only way to arrive at a productive notion of the good is by experiencing many things, and by practicing on understanding these things according to the order of the intellect (as causally determined and governed by natural laws) rather than simply forming knowledge about the world based on how different things haphazardly impinge on our bodies in different ways. Surely this is a difficult task, but it is nonetheless available to all. The only precondition is that we recognize the value of increasing our understanding and so this is the part that is most susceptible to indoctrination. When it comes to forming concepts of the good, however, this is not something we can inherit from someone else – such as a teacher – but it is rather something we must endeavor to construct for ourselves. The main obstacle to overcome in this endeavor is to not settle for concepts of the good that are irrational and that will result in the diminishing of our power of acting. On this account, it is difficult to conceive of indoctrination as a serious threat when it comes to the teacher influencing his or her students' formation of moral knowledge, since moral knowledge hinges on the experimentation (guided by reason) of the individual student.

Because fictions present powerful tools for shaping our responses to different situations, it is important to highlight that moral knowledge needs to be informed by the ability to understand things adequately. Social psychology tells us that “we do not routinely assess and define situations and contexts for ourselves. They come ready to hand” (Ravven 2013: 108). This means that in order for students not to simply take moral fictions at face value (and respond to a situation accordingly) they must work on cultivating their ability to understand situations and contexts in a way that is not distorted by the imagination. From a Spinozistic point of view, this is done by understanding a situation “just as if it were a Question of lines, planes, and bodies” (3pref). It follows from this that a Spinozistic education is always first and foremost about understanding situations and relations adequately. It is only when we are able to do this that we will be in a position to tell whether something will actually benefit our striving to persevere or not. Forming moral knowledge about a particular situation therefore demands that we understand it adequately, as an aspect of nature bound by the same natural laws as anything else. The purpose of fictions in education is simply to spark the curiosity of the students so that they begin to desire to



understand things more and better. It is not, however, the purpose of fictions to replace an adequate understanding of the world, or to offer moral guidelines that hamper rather than strengthen our ability to understand.

Besides inculcating in the students a desire for understanding the world rationally, the teacher must also work hard so as to challenge his or her students in ways that push them toward forming productive concepts of the good. In order to be able to do this, the teacher must be granted a certain degree of authority.

### **On teaching and authority**

It is called for at this point to consider more closely the notion that education sometimes is, and must be, a painful process. We will do this armed with some of the knowledge we have gained in the previous chapter regarding Spinoza's view that we tend to – when guided by the passive affects – seek pleasures that are not conducive (but inimical) to our rational desire to persevere in being. On this account, pleasure – when it keeps us from pursuing and attaining the things that are truly beneficial for our striving to persevere in being – becomes a problem that must be countered. In 4p43 Spinoza addresses this issue and he concludes: “Pleasure can be excessive and evil, whereas pain can be good insofar as the pleasure, *or* joy, is evil.” In the demonstration following this proposition Spinoza develops the notion that pain may serve a useful purpose insofar as it – depending on the context – may balance an excessive pleasure and thereby strengthen our overall power of acting. He writes:

Pain, on the other hand, which is a sadness, cannot be good, considered in itself alone (by p41). But because its force and growth are defined by the power of an external cause compared with our power (by p5), we can consider infinite degrees and modes of the powers of this affect (by p3). And so we can conceive it to be such that it can restrain pleasure, so that it is not excessive, and thereby prevent the body from being rendered less capable (by the first part of this proposition). To that extent, therefore, it will be good, q.e.d.

(4p43d)

This opens up for a discussion on teaching and authority, insofar as the teacher needs to be granted the authority to determine when to push the student toward overcoming his or her passions even when this turns out to be a painful experience. The challenge facing the teacher is to always make sure that the present pain is outweighed by the greater joy of successful self-preservation in the end. If the pain is such that it renders the student less capable – by overwhelming the student – then it is not a good pain and it will not serve the means of the self-preservation of the student. The trick therefore is to always balance the pain so that it serves the overall empowerment of the student. To be able to judge this, the teacher needs to be involved in an ongoing dialogue with the student. Since different people respond differently to different things, there is no fixed formula for handling a situation like this. Instead, the student needs



to be able to trust the teacher insofar as the teacher's job is to guard against the many dangers of living according to passive affects. This is the foundation of the agreement between teacher and students, and as long as this is respected – by both parties – focus may be placed on gradually increasing the degree of existence of teacher and student alike.

The authority of the teacher is founded on this agreement, and only insofar as the teacher acts in accordance with it can the authority of the teacher be sustained. It is important to note that it concerns a form of contractual agreement, as anything else would risk leading to a scenario where the teacher takes on the role of the conqueror, ruling by way of fear and intimidation. This, in turn, would indicate an education governed by passive affects, and it will therefore be contrary to reason and inimical to education. For this reason, the teacher cannot proclaim him or herself to be a self-evident authority, but must rather work hard to gain the trust of his or her students by acting as a moral exemplar and thereby earning the status of an authority and a role model, entrusted to guide the collective toward an increased rational understanding and to lead the way from bondage to freedom. Kitchen sums up this contractual conception of the teacher's authority well:

Indeed, it would make no sense to ascribe authority to oneself without foundation or justification. This justification appears to be ascribed, generally speaking, by a collection of people, perhaps best described as a “community.”  
(2014: 54–55)

The reason for taking great care that the authority of the teacher rests on a collective agreement is both simple and elegant from a Spinozistic point of view. This is because anything else would be contrary to reason (as the threat of punishment and the practice of blaming are always passive responses), and therefore it would also be contrary to the egoistic striving for self-preservation of the teacher him or herself. The contractual agreement can therefore be defended both on the grounds of the flourishing of the community, but also on the grounds of the flourishing of the individual insofar as one is conditioned by the other. Hence, it is in the self-interest of the teacher to maintain a relation where his or her authority is founded on mutual trust rather than on intimidation and coercion. Once this relation is established, however, there is nothing to say that this authority cannot (or shouldn't) be used to challenge the students to subject themselves to painful situations in order to overcome passive responses. This notion brings us back to the analogy of the optimistic nutritionist whose job it is to balance resistance so that the student can work on distinguishing the seemingly good from the true good by way of experimentation in a relatively safe environment.

### **What we think we want and what we really want: The optimistic nutritionist revisited**

Applying LeBuffe's analogy of the optimistic nutritionist to the role of the teacher serves as a useful springboard for an in-depth discussion on what I have termed the mental health perspective on education. This, however, requires an



understanding of what, more precisely, constitutes mental health for Spinoza. This is important since a Spinozistic conception of mental health differs from the standard view where mental health is commonly taken to involve some form of personal deficit rather than a problem external to the person suffering. It is important to distinguish the Spinozistic understanding of mental health from this view as the notion that education should aim at promoting mental health has been severely criticized (e.g., Peters 1964). In order to begin to flesh out the Spinozistic conception of mental health, we might return to the perspective of the optimistic nutritionist.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the optimistic nutritionist functions as a kind of guide reminding the student of the natural connection between sweetness (*laetitia*/joy) and nutrition (perseverance). This involves teaching the student how to identify things where these qualities coincide and to encourage the striving for these things by helping the student understand the detrimental effects of striving for things that are not conducive to self-preservation, but that give rise to excessive pleasures that hamper rather than strengthen the student's overall power of acting. In this sense, the optimistic nutritionist aims at helping the student make intelligent choices, where learning to interpret one's social environment correctly is an important aspect of this. A central aim of a Spinozistic education is therefore to teach students how to navigate among external things and people in a way that strengthens their desire for self-preservation, and by implication, fortifies their mental health.

Causes of mental illness are always external to the suffering person for Spinoza. They cannot be anything but external since nothing, for Spinoza, contains anything (in itself) by which it can be destroyed (3p4). Because a thing's very nature is to strive to persevere in being (3p7), a thing can only be destroyed, or impaired, by things that are contrary to its nature (3p5). This leads Spinoza to the curious conclusion that a suicide is not, strictly speaking, an act of self-harm, but that it is rather the effect of someone being overpowered by external causes to the extent that he or she is being destroyed by them (4p20s).<sup>4</sup>

Treating mental illness, from a Spinozistic perspective, therefore involves manipulating the environment. Manipulating the environment is simply a way of limiting the constant flux of external impulses so that a person is not completely overwhelmed by things but so that he or she has a chance of understanding affective changes, so as to be able to build up a defense against the most harmful passive affects by reordering ideas. The teacher cannot impose an understanding on a student, but the teacher can – to some extent – control the environment so that it is set up in a way that allows for the cognitive training necessary for coming to understand the true causes of the student's affective responses.

It follows from this that for Spinoza the cure is always knowledge. The more we understand, the healthier our minds will become. The more confused we are, on the other hand, the worse off we will be in the sense that our well-being will be at the mercy of the unpredictability of external things. Grasped from this perspective, education and the enhancement of mental health are inevitably linked insofar as education always concerns a conscious endeavor to increase



the understanding of the students. Whether we liken teachers to doctors or not, to the extent that teachers are concerned with expanding the understanding of their students, they are automatically concerned with enhancing mental health and with combating mental illness in Spinoza's view.<sup>5</sup> This is decidedly different from the traditional understanding of the task of the doctor, however, whose job it is to diagnose and to compensate for certain personal deficits understood to make for an intrinsic part of the person suffering. In a Spinozistic conception there is no deficit; there are simply more or less compatible individuals and bodies. The task, then, is to help the student understand which bodies combine well and which do not, and as we have seen, this cannot be determined beforehand but needs to be established continuously through active experimentation. This, in turn, requires an adequate understanding of the affects so as not to mistake things that are only seemingly beneficial for things that really are. This will serve to ensure, as far as it is possible, "that all understand what their own advantage consists in and that they act on a desire for this end rather than some other desire" (LeBuffe 2014: 217). In the sense that the teacher is the one overseeing this process, he or she may be compared with an optimistic nutritionist helping students come to see what they really want and to help them act on this desire. What they really want (by virtue of their nature as striving things) is to be successful in their striving for self-preservation. Since they – like we all tend to do – sometimes desire things that they believe to have this effect, but that the optimistic nutritionist recognizes as a joy that is not conducive to perseverance, they need help in coming to see that this desire is externally rather than internally constituted. Koistinen offers an example:

The miser judges money best, desires money most, but still errs. The point is that the miser builds his judgment on what could be called a false desire: a desire that is not in line with the desire that constitutes his real self. Desiring money for its own sake contributes to one's destruction.

(2014: 221)

The optimistic nutritionist, on this account, can help students avoid things that will contribute to their destruction. In this, the teacher (acting the role of the optimistic nutritionist) serves as a kind of therapist overseeing the mental development and well-being of his or her students.

### **The teacher as therapist: On mental health and mental illness**

Enjoying mental health, on Spinoza's account, is roughly the same as living a balanced life guided by reason. The greatest threat to mental health, as we have seen, is a life guided by passive affects. Such a life is characterized by excesses. Even though we all desire what is good for us, sometimes we mistake a temporary pleasure for a lasting joy, and we become so intent on procuring the object of our pleasure (because we falsely believe it to be the sole key to our happiness)



that we begin to disregard other things. As a result we will suffer from this imbalance, and we will be overly focused on only one single affect when our mental health is determined by our ability to experience many affects. In 4p44s Spinoza discusses this with regard to the notion that love and desire may be excessive (as established in 4p44):

Generally, then, the affects are excessive, and occupy the Mind in the consideration of only one object so much that it cannot think of others. And though men are liable to a great many affects, so that one rarely finds them to be always agitated by one and the same affect, still there are those in whom one affect is stubbornly fixed. For we sometimes see that men are so affected by one object that, although it is not present, they still believe they have it with them.

It becomes quite clear that when Spinoza speaks of these fixations of the mind, he is speaking of things that happen to most of us at one time or another (albeit perhaps not to the degree that we would label ourselves mentally ill). We may be fixated on another person as an object of our love and so neglect to eat and sleep properly because we are preoccupied with obsessing over how to gain (and hold on to) their company. We may be fixated on furthering our careers and so neglect other things that would keep us balanced, such as spending time with our families, painting or listening to music. The point is that Spinoza's conception of mental illness is such that it encompasses things that most of us have some experience of and that we encounter frequently. Of course, it is a matter of degree, and so where one person is temporarily overpowered by excessive affects, another person is overpowered to the extent that he or she becomes incapacitated over a longer period of time. What is important to note is that excessive passive affects are everywhere and that we are always subjected to them. While some of them are recognized as detrimental to our health, others are socially accepted and may even be celebrated as marks of the successful or condemned as acts typical of the cold hearted. Spinoza's point is that these affects are just as dangerous even if they happen to be socially accepted. Maybe even more so, because then they tend to be overlooked or they tend to be misconceived as expressions of the free will. Spinoza exemplifies:

But when a greedy man thinks of nothing else but profit, or money, and an ambitious man of esteem, they are not thought to be mad, because they are usually troublesome and are considered worthy of Hate. But Greed, Ambition, and Lust really are species of madness, even though they are not numbered among the diseases.

(4p44s)

These diseases are all effects of an imbalance, where a person is being overpowered by a passive affect connected with an external thing, whether it is a prospective lover, money or someone in our line of profession who is held in great



esteem by others. As a result, the fixated person becomes malnourished, mentally and physically. We neglect to eat and mistreat the body, and we become preoccupied with obsessing over one thing only and as a result we neglect to expose the mind to new ideas. This danger of affective imbalance is the main reason for why we should experience many things in the first place.

For the human Body is composed of a great many parts of different natures, which constantly require new and varied nourishment, so that the whole Body may be equally capable of all the things which can follow from its nature, and hence, so that the Mind also may be equally capable of understanding many things.

(4p45s)

Passive affects are powerful, however, and should not be underestimated. We know this intuitively if we have ever fallen madly in love or experienced the euphoria of winning a race or of becoming employee of the month. These experiences can become highly addictive, and so we begin to neglect other things in the hope that we may be able to experience it again, thereby sacrificing our long-term sense of happiness for even the briefest moment of bliss.

The explanation for behavior against the commands of reason, then, is that, although all of us at all times know and have a motive to act on the commands of reason, there are nevertheless powerful external causes that can give us a more powerful, passionate rather than active, motive to behave in ways that are contrary to the commands.

(LeBuffe 2014: 215)

This illustrates the inadequacy of simply imparting the commands of reasons as so many holy commandments and simply hoping that students will come to their senses and heed their advice. Were it that simple, much of the misery and suffering in the world would truly be inexplicable. Clearly, then, having access to sound advice concerning what an ethical life consists of is merely a small part of the process of becoming ethical through education. The hard part is to cultivate one's judgment in accordance with this understanding and to gain a better understanding of one's affects so that one can see clearly which encounters are conducive to one's happiness and which are not. What Spinoza's reasoning in 4p45s illustrates is that the answer is not as simple as to abstain from any worldly pleasures and to devote oneself entirely to meditation in isolation from other people. None of these things – money, prospective lovers, successful colleagues, etc. – are bad in and of themselves. They may very well be conducive to our joy when understood properly. The problem is that when we mistakenly take them to be the cause of our joy, and when we sacrifice all other aspects of our lives in preference of pursuing them, we neglect to understand that as we are highly complex individuals, composed of many smaller bodies, we require many things to sustain us and to help us flourish.



This also raises the stakes considerably for the teacher. It requires no teacher to hand over information about the best way to live your life. It does, however, require a teacher to illustrate what this life might look like, and to guide students through the ordeals of moderating the passive affects. It requires a teacher to help students see the richness of the world around them and to help them see natural connections between things and ideas so that they are not blinded by things they perceive as isolated goods. This may be approached in terms of a kind of cognitive training, where the teacher acts the part of a therapist facilitating a remapping of the world according to a deeper (scientifically grounded) understanding of the relation between the affects we undergo and the things we perceive and form ideas of in the world. Steinberg talks about this in terms of deliberative reasoning, which he perceives as being very different from the mere learning of rules.

Instead of seeing it as a process of rationally deducing specific rules of action and, relatively unproblematically, subsuming particular cases under these rules, I propose that we see deliberative reasoning as a complex, inexact art, the mastery of which requires a kind of cognitive training. Through this training – which depends crucially on the resources of memory and imagination – one reorients one's patterns of thought and action.

(Steinberg 2014: 178–179)

This reorientation needs to take place *in situ*. That is it cannot be carried out in isolation from all the stimuli of the social world. Otherwise we might well come to believe that we have become fully rational, that we are finally immune to the passive affects as it were, when in reality this can never be. Chances are that the shock of realizing that one's ability to reason is still no match for the powers of the passive affects will result in utter despair and a deep plunge into depression. It is better, then, to practice reordering ideas in practical situations so as to come to find out where the threshold of one's tolerance is located. Having identified this, one may then go on to practice overcoming passive affects in such a way as to not lose hope every time one is being temporarily overpowered. We will always be overpowered by passive affects. The trick is to find out how to live in a way where one is relatively safeguarded from the most dangerous of the passive affects. Finding this out can never be anything but experiential as the answer will, to some degree, be different for everyone posing the question. The role of the teacher is to encourage students to not give up even when they find themselves being overpowered by passive affects repeatedly. This involves explaining how this is part and parcel of gaining an understanding of the affects rather than a futile attempt to resist forces that are – and always will be – much more powerful than we are. It is also the part of the teacher to encourage students to take on these passive affects without fear (in well-administered doses obviously) and to celebrate even the smallest victory in the same sense the optimistic nutritionist congratulates someone who makes the connection between sweetness and health and who begins to let this mental connection be reflected in his or her everyday life.



As most of us are wont to avoid things that result in pain at whatever cost, the teacher needs to be able to judge when we have reached the limits of our capabilities for the moment and when we need to be pushed toward overcoming our false desires even when this experience turns out to be momentarily painful for us. This requires a carefully thought out plan where resistance is balanced in a way that will sustain the overall power of acting of the student rather than diminishing it by overwhelming the student. It also requires that the teacher is sensitive to the mental constitution of a particular student. Since the teacher is in part a therapist overseeing the development of the student and his or her striving for deliberation, it goes without saying that maintaining a dialogue between teacher and student is absolutely central. This dialogue needs to be couched in a greater plan, however, so as not to deteriorate into a simple exchange of opinions. In this, it is reminiscent of Derry's conception of a Vygotsian approach to curriculum design:

For Vygotsky, the issue was to find a way to design curricula so that learners would be in a position to exercise thinking in coming to know a substantial body of knowledge. In this sense the attribute of 'effective practice' was not to work for collaborative meaning-making where meaning is *constructed* by members of the class, but to set up obstacles designed to help thinking to develop in order to foster deeper understanding of existing knowledge.  
(2013: 52)

This notion of education structured around the setting up of necessary obstacles, is, I would argue, one of the main features of a Spinozistic conception of education. There are of course certain prerequisites necessary for this to work. First, there needs to be a general agreement between teacher and students as to what the main goal of education is (the happiness and empowerment of teacher and students alike). Second, there needs to be a sense of mutual trust and an understanding that the teacher will do what he or she judges necessary for the students to come to challenge and overcome their preconceived understandings of the good in order to establish a better, more productive, concept of the good. Third, there needs to be a strong belief that the world is, at least in principle, understandable, and that by understanding the world better (i.e., scientifically) we can come to understand ourselves better, and as a result we can live better and happier lives. Fourth and last, there needs to be an acknowledgment of the limitations of our singular powers and so the moral development of the student needs to be related to the development of the greater community in the sense that the empowerment of the individual human is both facilitated and constrained by the empowerment of the group. As James explains:

Rather than retreating from everyday society and its pressures in order to devote ourselves to reasoning, we have to bring our understanding to bear on the social and political problems that surround us and learn to empower ourselves not only as individuals, but as members of communities.  
(2014: 144)



Where this leads us is to the realization that a Spinozistic education amounts to a form of self-therapy, carried out under the guidance of the teacher. This self-therapy aims at perceiving and influencing the connections made between certain objects and certain emotional responses. We all make these connections by associating a given object with an emotional transformation, but we respond to different things in different ways. For some, who experience a profound sense of joy when subjecting themselves to mind-altering drugs, these drugs become an object they associate with feeling joy and therefore something they desire greatly. Others, however, whose experiences are different (because their minds and bodies are differently constituted) associate the drug with a feeling of sadness and therefore strive to avoid it. The point is that whether we seek to acquire the object or seek to avoid it, we generally do this for the same reason, namely, because we associate the object itself with a certain emotional transition in us. The Spinozistic challenge is to attempt to separate the affect from the idea of the object and by doing so becoming less determined by the various objects we encounter, whether they give rise to affects of joy or affects of sadness. By doing so Spinoza claims that we may reach a kind of equilibrium, where we moderate our passive responses and exchange the intense feelings of joy and sadness for a more enduring sense of happiness caused by a feeling of self-control and self-understanding.

There are many things around us that keep us from attaining this state of happiness, however. As indicated above, some of these things, which give rise to affects such as greed or envy, appear to be interwoven into the very fabric of society and sometimes even seem to be an essential and unavoidable part of who we are. In this sense we are threatened by mental illness always, even when we do not perceive it as such. Spinoza urges us to become aware of this and to counter these inadequate ideas about the good so as to be able to form a more stable community less torn by war and conflict. As Erich Fromm notes, this conception of mental health as “a manifestation of right living” and mental illness as “a failure to live according to the requirements of human nature” leads Spinoza to a conclusion that is “so foreign to the thinking of our time” in that he “considers passions that do not correspond to the needs of human nature as pathological; in fact, he goes so far as to call them a form of insanity” (2008: 78). Fromm continues:

Spinoza's concepts of activity and passivity are a most radical critique of industrial society. In contrast to today's belief that persons driven mainly by greed for money, possession, or fame are normal and well adjusted, they are considered by Spinoza utterly passive and basically sick. The active persons in Spinoza's sense, which he personified in his own life, have become exceptions, and are somewhat suspected of being 'neurotic' because they are so little adapted to so-called normal activity.

(2008: 78)

One of the ways in which passivity shapes contemporary notions about education is in the increasingly common conception of the student as consumer and



of the related image of education as a kind of service that can be bought and sold (see Clarke & Newman 2009). For this reason, the student as consumer offers a good example by way of which we may continue to discuss the therapeutic aspects of a Spinozistic education.

### **A note on the hazards of treating the student as consumer**

The notion that the student is a kind of consumer and that the educational system a kind of open market where services and goods are bought and sold is part of a bigger narrative where contemporary society may be said to have been increasingly shifted toward a more consumer-oriented view of citizens (Clarke et al. 2007). One of the interesting aspects of this picture is that it serves to illustrate Spinoza's conception of mental illness as a kind of wider social force that hinges on sanctioned misrepresentations of the good. Part of the notion that the student is a consumer of services implies that the value of the service is, to a great extent, determined by the consumer's experience of it. Good education, from this point of view, correlates with a satisfied customer. As has been argued by others, one of the problems with construing education in this way is that it risks steering away from "a kind of learning that intensifies or unsettles desires rather than simply aspiring to satisfy them" (Staddon & Standish 2012: 631). Setting aside many of the concerns that this issue raises, I wish to focus on the tension between education as a form of therapy geared for the self-determination and deliberation of the student and the consumer-oriented view where good education appears to be measured by how well it complies with the expressed wants of the student.

In order to appreciate the problematic aspects of this tension, it is useful to return to the discussion in Chapter Three concerning the conflation of wants and needs in education. As we have seen throughout this book, a Spinozistic account of education focuses on having the student coming to understand his or her needs better, and by doing so, being able to make intelligent choices based on this understanding. From this perspective, the overarching aim of education may be described in terms of the intrinsic rewards of gaining a better (more rational) understanding of ourselves so as to be able to see what it is that we really want. This, then, can never be a starting point for education. The notion that we already know what we want – which I presume is how we typically conceive of a competent consumer – is inimical to education. To find out what we want – by seeing clearly the difference between temporary wants and long-term needs and being able to align these through hard work and the guidance of a knowledgeable teacher – is the very purpose of education. The problem with conceiving of our uneducated wants as a starting point for education is that we then risk subsuming all the information we are being provided with under these expressed wants. As a result, we may never come to question the initial motivation we have for educating ourselves, and so any goal we posit as a starting point – whether it be wealth, success or popularity – remains fixed, and all the information we gain is made to serve the furthering of this striving.



When we misconstrue our needs as being dictated by the things we want – out of a love for things that we can never hold on to (again, such as wealth, success or popularity) – our well-being becomes very dependent upon the presence of external things, and we are then easily swayed by the opinions of others and will be greatly affected by changes in the world that we have no real sense of control over. This notion that love, which is the main driving force motivating us to desire more and to strive harder, can also be our undoing when invested too narrowly in various temporary things is at the heart of Spinoza's account of mental illness. Accordingly, Spinoza concludes that

it should be noted that sickness of the mind and misfortunes take their origin especially from too much Love toward a thing which is liable to many variations and which we can never fully possess. For no one is disturbed or anxious concerning anything unless he loves it, nor do wrongs, suspicions, and enmities arise except from Love for a thing which no one can really possess.

(5p20s)

There is a sense in which the notion of the student as consumer appears to build upon this problematic image of the good as the fulfillment of temporary wants. Given that the striving for goods that are in competition may be argued to give rise to all sorts of harmful affects, such as envy and hate, one might wonder what comes out of an education structured around this kind of ideal. As Jonas have argued, it may well be that “[r]ather than constructing individuals who are self-disciplined, courageous and autonomous, the education system constructs persons who are capricious, cowardly and governed by the opinions of others” (2010: 47). This brings us back to the pivotal question of how, then, the striving for self-discipline, courage and autonomy can and should be enacted in an educational context so as to avoid educating people into a state of perpetual bondage.

### **Educating for true happiness**

In a broad sense, the account of education outlined in this book is modeled after Spinoza's own self-therapeutic and self-educational project. He describes this personal quest poignantly in his early work, the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*:

After experience had taught me the hollowness and futility of everything that is ordinarily encountered in daily life, and I realised that all the things which were the source and object of my anxiety held nothing of good or evil in themselves save insofar as the mind was influenced by them, I resolved at length to enquire whether there existed a true good, one which was capable of communicating itself and could alone affect the mind to the exclusion of all else, whether, in fact, there was something whose



discovery and acquisition would afford me a continuous and supreme joy to all eternity.

(*TIE* I/C: 7)

This quote points to a major challenge facing a person striving to be liberated through education: the challenge of being able to successfully reorder one's ideas so that the things desired are truly good for one's striving to persevere in existence, rather than being things that – while believed to be good – in reality contribute to the bondage of the passive affects. One of the things that this book seeks to add to Spinoza's self-therapeutic and self-educational ideal is the importance of a knowledgeable teacher guiding the student through this arduous process. The importance of the role of the teacher cannot be overstated. As we have seen, it falls upon the teacher to point to the objects that will lead to true happiness and to differentiate these from those that – while constituting temporary pleasures – will not lead to true happiness but instead to the vacillation of the mind and to suffering due to *akrasia*. While these things differ to some extent from person to person, the student can learn a lot from observing the teacher acting on his or her rational desires in the role of the optimistic nutritionist. It also falls upon the teacher to oversee the student's cultivation of judgment, spurring the student on so that he or she does not give in excessively to various temporary pleasures but remains fixed in his or her striving for a more sustainable brand of happiness.

In this sense, the teacher functions as a role model – illustrating how to apply judgment properly – and a therapist, helping the student condition his or her cognitive responses to the external world so that his or her ideas of what is beneficial coincides with what is truly beneficial for the striving to persevere. Part of this means offering the right amount of resistance so that the student is not led to avoid the necessary obstacles needed to overcome in order to cultivate a good and reliable judgment. This requires that the authority of the teacher is respected (just like the authority of the governing body of the state needs to be respected lest the freedom and safety of all of its citizens be jeopardized) and that painful experiences are not automatically being avoided out of a misdirected concern for the student's well-being. In return, the teacher is afforded a secure place in a rational community where the striving of each contributes to the common striving for self-preservation. In this sense the power of acting of each is multiplied, and the personal quest for deliberation is turned into a joint endeavor, many times more powerful than the striving of its individual parts. The object of this joint striving is true happiness, which in turn is understood in terms of a sound mental health able to withstand socially spread ills such as envy, hatred and greed.

## Notes

- 1 For a similar discussion in the *TTP*, see Ch. 5.8/I: 72–73.
- 2 This is motivated by Spinoza's conclusion that "it rarely happens that men live according to the guidance of reason. Instead, their lives are so constituted that they are usually envious and burdensome to one another" (4p35s).



- 3 For a critical discussion on Spinoza and the problem of indoctrination in education, see Puolimatka (2001).
- 4 Consequently, Spinoza concludes: “But that a man should, from the necessity of his own nature, strive not to exist, or to be changed into another form, is as impossible as that something should come from nothing” (4p20s).
- 5 The assertion that the Spinozistic teacher is not comparable to the standard view of the medical doctor is warranted as a response to R.S. Peters’ warning against confusing “the task of the educator with that of the doctor” and of treating children “as patients who have to be weaned in a kindly way to nibble at the raw meat of the modern world” (1964: 200).

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# Conclusion

## Outlining a Spinozistic account of education

This, the conclusion, offers a brief summary of the various themes discussed in the book, and it proposes an outline of a coherent conception of education from a Spinozistic point of view. It is argued that the Spinozistic account of education offered in this book can provide new perspectives on some of the most enduring challenges facing contemporary philosophy of education. These challenges include the problem of free will in education; the problem of understanding the student as consumer and of conflating wants and needs in education; the problem of the status of moral knowledge; as well as the problem of indoctrination in education. The conclusion closes by proposing that gradual self-determination is the overarching purpose of education from a Spinozistic perspective. The path to self-determination is taken to be coextensive with understanding and accepting natural causation and thereby coming to terms with the natural limitations of human understanding and agency.

### **Again, what's in it for education?**

In order to attempt to answer the question of what Spinoza has to offer a contemporary understanding of education in any meaningful way it may be useful to start off by looking at some of the limitations that seem to restrict other accounts frequently referred to (or hinted at) in contemporary educational debates. The purpose of this would be to illustrate that any perceived weakness in the underlying metaphysical assumptions of a theory of education will tend to come back to haunt the arguments that are then formulated on the basis of these assumptions. For example, if the concept of freedom is vague to begin with, this vagueness will inevitably remain in any subsequent attempts to formulate an educational account aimed at the deliberation of students. Similarly, if the underlying concept of the good is weak, it will be equally difficult to present any persuasive arguments for why anyone should desire this particular good to begin with. My argument, of course, is that Spinoza's tightly built system – being a unified whole comprised of his metaphysics, his psychology and his ethics at its core – provides an exciting (and largely untested) backdrop for an educational account where we can be reasonably sure that as long as it is carefully constructed, its basic metaphysical assumptions are never far removed



from its normative upshots. Let me illustrate by rehearsing and sharpening some of the critical points raised in this book.

One of the major problems of many influential debates concerning education, as I perceive it, has to do with the reliance on a problematic notion of the will. Student-centered or child-centered accounts of education (in its many forms), for example, generally assume that in order to find out what the child or student needs, we must ask him or her what he or she wants. Similarly, as we saw in Chapter Three, Noddings argues for the importance of taking the expressed needs of students into account in order to safeguard the relational core of education. Sometimes it appears as if the only available choice stands between asking students what it is that they want and more or less coercing them into doing something against their wishes. To me, this seems to be a hasty and not entirely sound conclusion. The problem, as I perceive it, emanates from a rather vague concept of the will that, in turn, gives rise to the unfortunate conflation of students' wants and needs.

If the will is perceived as a spontaneous expression – as I assume it would have to be if it is taken to be a faculty through which humans may intervene with the natural order of things – then this seems to me to result in an unexplained bifurcation whereby the will is construed as a kind of supernatural force acting upon the world from without as it were. The obvious benefit of this explanation is that the will may then be said to originate from within the student and can be understood in terms of a genuine expression of his or her needs. This, however, seems to require the kind of bifurcation of nature that Spinoza warned against as it introduces different sets of rules for different things in the world (as explained in Chapter One). How else could you explain the fact that certain things have the ability to act against the laws binding all other things? As we have seen, this will be difficult to explain. To counter this difficulty Spinoza proposes a different understanding of the human will, where it is not exempt from the natural order of things. Instead, it is understood as a kind of psychological label, useful for coping with the fact that we seldom grasp the true causes of our desires due to our cognitive limitations. Being unaware of these causes, we tend to assume – but for no good reason – that we act spontaneously and in a manner that is not constrained or determined by external things.

Let us take a closer look at the enduring debate of free will and moral responsibility in education so as to get a clearer idea of what is at stake. The question of free will is undoubtedly at the heart of education. Still, free will is frequently taken for granted in education partly because autonomy and free will are generally assumed to be coextensive. The link between autonomy and free will is established in Kenneth A. Strike's three conditions of freedom presented here in an educational context:

- (1) A person must be able to do what he chooses. This includes possessing relevant abilities and skills of execution as well as not being prohibited or physically prevented from taking a chosen course of action.



- (2) A person must possess those reasoning skills which enable him to evaluate various courses of action. This is a matter of having learned to apply those criteria relevant to making various sorts of judgments.
- (3) A person must be psychologically constituted such that it is possible for the exercise of such reasoning skills to become the actual determinates of choice and action. (1972: 274)

These three conditions appear as commonsensical and perhaps even as self-evident in the sense that to be educated is generally taken to involve becoming autonomous, which, in turn, is often assumed to involve gaining control over one's personal decision-making. There is a paradox at the root of this assumption, however. This paradox concerns the tension between what is required for someone to be educated and influenced by someone else (i.e., a teacher) and what is required for someone to be the cause of his or her own choices and actions. Johannes Giesinger puts this paradox as follows:

It seems that what he [the learner] thinks, what he wants and how he acts can never be truly *his*, since it is brought about by education and other factors beyond his control. *On the other hand*, if we consider the learner as endowed with a free will, then it might seem impossible to educate him at all.

(2010: 515)

Expressed differently, this means that “if his [the learner's] present and future actions stem from a will that is genuinely free, then they will be independent from any educational influences” (2010: 515). As a response to this paradox Giesinger offers “a reason-based understanding of freedom” (2010: 525) where “a person is free if she acts on reasons she accepts as valid” (2010: 520). Giesinger thereby proposes a weaker concept of freedom than the one offered above by Strike insofar as the learner's reasons “are not (yet) part of his identity” but that “those reasons that one is prompted to accept become *one's own* in a strong sense” through education (2010: 522). Education, on Giesinger's view, may therefore be described as the process whereby “the child's basic freedom can be cultivated to become full-blooded autonomy” instead of the process whereby “an unfree object can be transformed into an autonomous subject” (2010: 525).

To act freely in this sense is not simply to make a choice, but to make a choice *for the right reasons*. Accordingly, we may distinguish between everyday choices that are made out of habit or that follow from someone's upbringing in a particular social milieu and an autonomous moral choice that is taken to be the result of a deliberate educational process. Stefaan E. Cuypers notes this distinction and ascribes it to authenticity: “For that reason, the ‘free man’ not only is a free chooser but also possesses an authentic code of conduct in the light of which he chooses” (2009: 126). Cuypers turns to R. S. Peters, arguing that “a choice (or decision) is autonomous if and only if its agent both has control in making it and is authentic with respect to it” (2009: 126). For someone to be



authentic with respect to a choice means that the choice “causally issues from antecedents springs of action, such as beliefs and desires, which are ‘authentic’ or ‘truly the agent’s own,’ as opposed to being inauthentic or alien” (2009: 126). This means that a choice that is considered authentic in this sense is caused by the moral agent him or herself, bringing us back to the paradox between being the cause of one’s own choices and actions and being influenced by external factors such as education.

Metaphysically speaking, what does it mean to say that someone is the true cause of a choice? As we have seen, for Spinoza, to be the true cause of something means having access to the full causal chain of that thing. For a person to be the true cause of an action would therefore mean having access to the full causal chain leading up to the event in question. This, of course, is not possible since the full causal chain of any given event is too complex for us to encompass. As finite modes we are therefore limited in the sense that we are always externally caused and therefore never the full cause of ourselves. We are part of nature, and everything in nature is causally determined by antecedent causes, including our choices. For Kant, however, being morally autonomous means being unconditionally free. This kind of freedom is grounded in a transcendental and noumenal realm and it follows that a person’s moral reasoning – being unconditionally free – is therefore necessarily untouched by the phenomenal world of appearances.<sup>1</sup> As Giesinger notes, to be “a transcendently free person” ultimately means that one “stands outside the realm of natural laws” (2010: 517).<sup>2</sup> One way of avoiding determinism in moral education, then, would be to appeal to a Kantian sense of freedom, where moral choices are not considered empirical phenomena but rather uncaused and spontaneous expressions of a free will. Accordingly, Ravven notes that in the context of moral education “the Aristotelian notion of personal character has been reshaped through the lens of free will” so that “character educators use a (Kantian) model of choosing actions that accord with principles (or virtues) to which children have freely committed themselves, rather than a model that involves training behavior” (2013: 44). Ravven goes on to argue that the Kantian account of freedom has turned out to be extremely influential in education insofar as it allows for a concept of free will that can help steer moral education toward personal decision-making rather than toward the habituation and forming of character.

While the Kantian account of freedom can explain a self-caused choice, this explanation is conditioned by the fact that we are dealing with a kind of freedom that “cannot be attributed to any natural human sentiments or dispositions but [that] can be attributed . . . to the noumenal self which lies beyond any empirical knowledge we may have of our inner phenomenal nature” (Carr 1991: 80). This brings us right back to the paradox of the free will in education. If we posit a free will in a Kantian sense, we may well conceive of a choice as being self-caused, but since this kind of freedom is necessarily untouched by the phenomenal world, it is not clear how the free will can be influenced by education. Accordingly, there seems to be a tension between Strike’s first two conditions of freedom – positing that a student needs to learn (1) “relevant



abilities and skills of execution” as well as (2) “those reasoning skills” enabling a student “to evaluate various courses of action” (1972: 274) – and his third condition stating that (3) one needs to be the actual determinate of one’s choices and actions. The tension results from the fact that conditions 1 and 2 appear to presuppose external factors such as a knowledgeable teacher and being able to learn from one’s experiences in the phenomenal world, whereas condition 3 (at least if we follow the requirements of a Kantian freedom) precludes the influence of such external factors.

For Spinoza, however, autonomy is a gradual notion, and it is coextensive with our understanding of ourselves and the natural world. The more we understand, the more we can act in accordance with this understanding and the more autonomous (vis-à-vis external causes) we will become as a result. This does not involve having a free will however. As we saw in Chapter Three, Spinoza understands the concept of a free will to result from a lack of knowledge insofar as it means that the human mind is granted a kind of ontological primacy that is not explicable other than as a kind of superstition. Understanding that the concept of a free will is an inadequate idea therefore becomes part of understanding oneself as a finite mode being conditioned and determined by other finite modes. As such, disposing with the superstition of the free will is an important step on the way to autonomy for Spinoza.

Even though autonomy might be salvaged in a Spinozistic universe, it seems that the same cannot be said for moral responsibility (as we saw in Chapter Three). This is so since, in metaphysical terms, to be the cause of oneself is a logical requirement for moral responsibility. For Spinoza, a person cannot be the cause of him or herself since a person is a mode of substance, and modes are always caused by other modes (1p28). To speak plainly, if my behavior is caused by something external to me, then how can I be held responsible for it? For me to be the complete cause of my actions seems to require a level of self-determination that natural things are not generally attributed with, making this difficult to conceive. In order to illustrate the problem we might turn to Galen Strawson’s Basic Argument stating that:

(1) Nothing can be *causa sui* – nothing can be the cause of itself. (2) In order to be morally responsible for one’s actions one would have to be *causa sui*, at least in certain crucial mental aspects. (3) Therefore nothing can be truly morally responsible.

(1994: 5)

On the one hand, the Basic Argument offers a straightforward rebuttal of moral responsibility to the extent that it is difficult to see how someone can be the cause of him or herself as we are all to some extent products of our heredity and our upbringing. On the other hand, there is a strong sense in which moral education requires moral responsibility in precisely this sense. Carr, for instance, writes: “In fact I hold the common-sense view that most of us are for most of the time quite responsible (in the sense that, amongst other things, we could



have chosen to do something other than what we actually did) for the wrongdoing we commit . . .” (1991: 17). Avoiding the core question of self-causation, Carr subscribes to a common sense view so as not to undermine the central place of moral responsibility within moral philosophy. This raises the following question: are moral responsibility and praise and blame really as crucial to moral philosophy as we tend to believe that they are? Let me clarify by noting that the question here is not whether we have the capacity to act so as to prevent bad things from happening but whether it makes sense (philosophically) to blame someone for not acting in a morally acceptable way. Carr expresses this problem as follows:

If ideas of this sort are taken completely serious then it may well be appropriate to constrain the individuals in question, to submit them to psychiatric treatment, to re-educate them out of the attitudes they have acquired in vicious environments or even to try to eradicate whatever might be understood to have caused the delinquent behaviour in those environments, but it is really not to the point to blame or hold agents responsible for actions concerning which they could not have known better.

(1991: 34)

Despite the logical force of Strawson’s Basic Argument, we might explain the importance of retaining a strong sense of moral responsibility by appealing to the benefits of *the experience of having a choice* as such. Young Pai explains that “[t]he feeling of being able to act contrary to his [the agent’s] character may be nothing but an illusion, but it is a psychological fact” (1966: 143). Similarly, Strawson claims that the psychological experience of having a choice is strong enough to make us disregard the logical force of the Basic Argument. Because “such situations of choice occur regularly in human life,” Strawson argues that “[t]hey are the fundamental source of our inability to give up belief in true or ultimate moral responsibility” (1994: 10). This means that while it is difficult to see how children and students can be the true causes of themselves, it appears to be equally hard to abandon the idea that they have free will and that they are, to some extent at least, morally responsible for their actions. This dispute is unlikely to be settled for the simple reason that if we were to accept the truth of the Basic Argument, it seems that we would also be forced to accept the fact that “[i]t is exactly as just to punish or reward people for their actions as it is to punish or reward them for the (natural) colour of their hair or the (natural) shape of their faces” (1994: 16).

This conclusion, of course, is precisely the one Spinoza draws when he asserts that “[i]f only those were fit to be punished whom we feign to sin only from freedom, why do men try to exterminate poisonous snakes? For they sin only from their own nature, nor can they do otherwise” (CM II, 8/C: 331). As we established in Chapter Three, praise and blame are not relevant factors for Spinoza. What is relevant is whether the wrongdoer is prevented from doing wrong, in which case the suffering individual and the greater social body may



regain its loss of strength, not whether he or she is morally responsible or not. Doing away with moral responsibility obviously does not frighten Spinoza. Instead he perceives it to be yet another cultural superstition standing in the way of the life of reason.

In an educational context, the unwillingness to seriously consider the plausibility of free will and moral responsibility may be attributed to a fear of legitimizing what R. S. Peters calls “a universal get-out” (2015a: 70), acting as a kind of vaccine against blame related to vices and immoral behavior in general. Peters warns of this tendency to avoid moral accountability, calling it a *social malaise*, which he claims is commonly related to a timely appeal to causal determinism insofar as it involves “a denial of responsibility coupled with a story about the causes of actions and standards” (2015a: 60). Peters goes on to argue that those who succumb to this *social malaise* “justify, or excuse, their failure to take responsibility for their own lives by an appeal to causes” (2015a), thereby indicating that causal determinism, rather than describing a world ruled by natural laws and regularities, is a fiction made up for the convenience of those who wish to avoid being blamed for their sins. Peters’ deep concerns about the detrimental effects of the spreading of this *social malaise* is evident from the following passage:

If the word goes round that people cannot help doing things because of their class or their upbringing, their conditioning in the carry-cot or some such thing – then they may tend to sit about like angry young men, blaming everyone but themselves, but doing nothing about their condition. Their plight illustrates neatly the contention with which I began: that a social malaise can be the product of half-truths and of intellectual confusion.  
(2015a: 63)

Much like Carr (1991) above, Peters proves unable to provide a satisfying answer to the pressing question of how we are to understand and explain a free will in a manner that does not result in a bifurcation of nature, where all natural things act in accordance with the laws and regularities of nature except the human faculty of the will, which is somehow exempt from these natural laws. Put differently, how is it that most known things act in accordance with the same regularities (such as efficient causation) whereas certain things (i.e., the human will) are attributed with the ability to circumscribe these otherwise universal regularities? The problem here is that this bifurcation of nature opens up for different sets of rules for different things, and from the point of view of the natural world it becomes difficult (if not impossible) to explain these different rules with the unfortunate result that they appear as entirely exceptional and supernatural. While the exceptionality of the human will is commonly taken for granted in education, there are seldom explanations offered for this alleged exceptionality. Accordingly, when Peters argues that he “would want to distinguish carefully between causes proper such as movements of the body and brain, and things like deliberating, deciding, having reasons, understanding



truths, etc., which are often also called ‘causes’” (2015a: 66), he fails to provide a convincing explanation for this distinction. The human will, in this sense, is simply treated as a brute fact. Refusing to accept brute facts, Spinoza instead treats precisely these aspects of human psychology “just as if it were a Question of lines, planes, and bodies” (3pref). As Karolina Hübner remarks, this means that for Spinoza, “will, appetite, and desire all identify from the perspective of fundamental concepts (‘thought’ and ‘extension’), one and the same causal dimension of a things’ essential nature” (2013: 32).

Momentarily disregarding the lack of explanation for this bifurcation of nature, we might still worry about the practical effects of denying free will, and for this reason alone agree with Peters’ appraisal of the dangers of denying the reality of moral responsibility. In doing so, the most pressing question is whether Peters’ dystopian image is the most likely result of denying spontaneity in nature. That is, is it reasonable to assume that the denial of a free will inevitably leads to large-scale social collapse? From Spinoza’s point of view, as we have seen, the answer is no. What we stand to lose is a superstitious belief in a supernatural power that we cannot explain. By doing away with this idea, however, we stand to gain a more realistic conception of ourselves (and our power) and on Spinoza’s view, a more sustainable understanding of why society needs to be protected from aggressors and how a more peaceful society is at the same time a more rational society, where the benefits of the individual can be made coextensive with the benefits of the collective. From a Spinozistic perspective, to further this understanding is a much more productive educational ideal than to preserve the commonsensical notion of the free will.

Another unfortunate consequence of this vague – commonsensical – understanding of the will is, as we saw in the previous chapter, the notion of the student as consumer. If we could legitimately conflate wants and needs, then the notion of the student as consumer would be relatively unproblematic. If, however, we see the benefits of distinguishing between wants and needs – where a want is any temporary desire for pleasure and a need is a desire for a thing that will certainly benefit our self-preservation – then there is reason to believe that the demands of the uneducated consumer are generally founded on temporary wants rather than long-term needs. The reason for this is that it takes education to be able to recognize and to act on one’s needs. To found education on the expressed wants of students therefore seems to be to posit opinions and passivity as ideals. What happens then is that what we take to be freedom (i.e., the ability to influence the kind of education we receive) ends up being our bondage. That is, instead of gaining the freedom to adequately understand our position in the world – as constrained and limited beings among an infinity of other things – we become enslaved by the unpredictability of our passive affects, ever chasing the next transient thing that we hope will be able to relieve us from our suffering and pain.

Passivity thereby renders students vulnerable to opinion. Being easily swayed by the opinions of others is a desirable trait from the point of view of the commodification of education. If education is conceived in terms of a commodity



to be exchanged on a marketplace, the trick is to be able to persuade students to become good customers. To be a good customer is inimical to being an educated person, however. A good customer is one who will keep shopping around in the hope of one day finding the right product to satisfy all of his or her needs. A well-educated person, however, is one who has come to know his or her needs well enough that he or she will no longer need to shop around at all. These are two very different approaches to the question of human well-being. As we have discussed at length in this book, to become educated (from a Spinozistic perspective) therefore entails being guided by a knowledgeable teacher through the arduous process of identifying one's true needs.

This makes the logic of education very different from the logic of the market. As Walter Feinberg notes:

In market models consumers are [to] supposed know what they need, and producers bid in price and quality to satisfy them. In professional models the producer not only services a need, but also defines it and the professional body is supposed to maintain quality.

(2001: 403)

If students already knew their needs, there would be no need for education. Educators therefore have to assume that the “professional provider [i.e., the teacher] is in a better position to define a real need than the client [i.e., the student]” (2001: 404). Despite this tension between the logic of education and the logic of the market model, we have seen an ever-increasing turn toward the marketization of education on a global scale. Gert Biesta has noted that “[t]his way of thinking introduces a logic which focuses on the users or consumers of the educational provision and a very suitable name for the consumer of education is, of course, ‘the learner’” (2005: 57). As Biesta goes on to argue, “[o]ne of the main problems with the new language of learning is that it allows for a re-description of the process of education in terms of an economic transaction” (2005: 58). The problem with this, of course, is that it severely misconstrues the logic of education since “the underlying assumption that learners come to education with a clear understanding of what their needs are, is a highly questionable assumption” (2005: 59). As Biesta rightly notes: “It forgets that a major reason for engaging in education is precisely to find out what it is that one actually needs – a process in which educational professionals play a crucial role because a major part of their expertise lies precisely there” (2005: 59).

A Spinozistic account of education presents forceful – philosophically robust – counter-arguments to the marketization and commodification of education. While it does entail that education concerns satisfying the needs of students,<sup>3</sup> it shows how these needs are not to be confused with temporary wants and how understanding what one needs is a difficult and demanding process central to the educational project. It argues that the market model, where students are conceived as consumers, is primarily focused on satisfying students' wants rather than meeting their true needs. Since temporary wants are never fully satisfied, this



creates consumers who will continue to consume. Shifting the focus from wants to needs, a Spinozistic account of education presents a way for education to counteract temporary desires and to steer students toward a deeper understanding of their needs so that they will be less determined by external factors and more determined by an adequate understanding of what is rational to strive for.

Another problem that besets theories of education, and theories of moral education in particular, is related to the status of moral knowledge. Again we seem to be dealing with a kind of dualism, where we have the assumed objectivity of Good and Evil on the one hand and the threat of complete relativism on the other. The first option is problematic because it is difficult to hinge the monolithic concepts of Good and Evil on anything besides an anthropomorphic idea of a judgmental God (who else would set the standard?), and the second option is problematic because it tends to lead us down a path where it is difficult to conceive of a coherent account of education to begin with. Since the second option has – for obvious reasons – never had much impact on educational theory, I suggest we pass it over and focus instead on the first. Whereas we might think that this option is hopelessly outdated, I would argue that it makes for the (at least implicit) foundation of many contemporary educational ideals. One such ideal is the notion of the altruistic teacher (discussed in Chapter Three). The notion of the teacher as a self-sacrificing altruist is difficult to conceive outside of the context of eternal rewards and punishments.

Spinoza's psychological egoism – and his constructivist account of moral knowledge that follows from this – presents us with a viable alternative, however. In fact, it presents us with an alternative that does not subscribe to the objectivity of Good and Evil, and yet it does not succumb to the amorality of complete relativism. This hinges on Spinoza's constructivist understanding of value. In short, as we have seen, anything that benefits my striving to persevere is good and anything contrary to this striving is bad. This understanding of value is not unique for humans (although it is restricted in the sense that it only applies to striving things and not to nature *qua* substance). When operationalized, however, it will turn out that some things – such as friendship and benevolence – are good for all rational humans, as they will increase their chances of persevering and flourishing without posing a threat to others. Good and evil, then, are only real insofar as we relate them to things in the world and use these concepts to determine whether something is truly good for our striving to persevere or not. In an educational setting, this means that in order to be liberated from bondage, we need to learn more about what benefits us and what does not. This hinges on the notion that we may actually find this out, and that we can become enlightened in the sense that we can come to recognize what brings us closer to the ideal of freedom and what is required for us to act on this knowledge. At the same time, we escape the problem of having to posit a supernatural force establishing values from without and regulating the striving for virtue by means of rewards and punishments. To the degree that we understand more about ourselves, we can begin to act on the knowledge of the good and so become more self-determined and thereby more virtuous. This, in itself,



is all the reward we can ever hope for. Correspondingly, if we fail to do this, we will always be torn by our hopes and fears, and this instable existence is the only punishment we need fear.

This amounts to a kind of ethical egoism that seems quite foreign to most accounts of education insofar as it means that the teacher's main driving force is the egoistic desire to persevere and flourish in being. As we have seen, however, this requires a community guided by reason and so it would be irrational to assume that the teacher may do this at the expense of his or her students. Quite the contrary, the teacher needs to endeavor to make his or her students recognize the value of striving to become more rational so they can strengthen one another in a joint striving for the same thing. One way of putting this is to say that the teacher should strive to make his or her students into moral exemplars so that the teacher may emulate them in turn. This scheme aims at ensuring that education is propelled by the active striving to persevere and flourish in being rather than by passive responses such as self-sacrifice and pity.

Spinoza seems to me to present a much more realistic account of the potential of education than those accounts that assume the existence of a free will or the reality of moral knowledge. This makes Spinoza's moral theory highly interesting for the philosophy of education. Needless to say, it is not, however, an account of education exempt from challenges. For one thing, as we saw in the previous chapter, there is the problem of indoctrination. The problem of indoctrination in education is related to the issue of authenticity discussed earlier in this chapter. The relevant concern may be put in the form of the following question: if a child or student is manipulated into holding certain values rather than others, in what sense can these values be labeled authentic? An illuminating example concerns religious practices where children are habituated early on into holding certain values. Cuypers describes this scenario as follows:

The child . . . may not be able to refrain from a certain religious practice – her relevant actions would express choices stemming from unsheddable, antecedent causal elements that are not truly the child's own – because of the way in which the religious training took place.

(2009: 127)

While this example may strike us as raising a legitimate point, it harbors a problematic philosophical assumption that we recognize from the discussion on free will earlier. The problem is that it is not at all clear how we are to distinguish between "causal elements that are not truly the child's own" and those that are. Returning to Kant, we saw that our moral autonomy hinges on a kind of freedom that is grounded in a transcendental realm. Full autonomy, then, appears to be conditioned by an understanding of moral reasoning that is untainted by the phenomenal world of appearances. This, as Giesinger (2012: 777) notes, makes it difficult to see how the noumenal self can be educated as it is necessarily unaffected by external empirical influences. Even if we assume that a child's character can in fact be molded through education, it is still not clear how we



are to draw a sharp line between inculcating moral values (that the child can come to be the true cause of) and manipulating the child into adopting someone else's values (that the child will never be the true cause of).

The question of indoctrination amounts to what R. S. Peters has referred to as “the paradox of moral education” insofar as it entails that children “can and must enter the palace of Reason through the courtyard of Habit and Tradition” (2015b: 52). The challenge facing the educator is how to inculcate good habits “in a way which does not stultify the development of a rational code or the mastery of the ‘language’ of activities at a later stage” (2015b: 52). Peters’ solution to this paradox is to propose a distinction between two kinds of habits; those that are mere automatized responses to external stimuli and those that are, in Cuypers’ words, “*rationally* permeated tendencies to act” (2009: 128). For actions to be rationally permeated means that “they have reasons behind them, and although they usually operate automatically, we are at liberty to stop them” (2009: 128–129). However, this still leaves us with the question of what the conditions of “the initial instillment of these prerequisite elements of adequate moral habits” (2009: 129) are.

Addressing this question, Cuypers (and Haji & Cuypers 2004) suggests a future-oriented and “relational view of authenticity” arguing that “although pertinent psychological elements instilled in the child during the prenormative stage are not authentic per se, they can be authentic with an eye toward future moral responsibility” (Cuypers 2009: 134). This does not solve the problem of determining where this authentic moral ability originates, however. It remains a seemingly supernatural phenomenon insofar as authenticity appears to amount to an unexplainable self-caused thing. To the extent, then, that indoctrination is contrasted with self-caused values, it appears that we have arrived back at the question of self-causation discussed earlier. Much like with the question of free will and moral responsibility, then, it may turn out that the question of indoctrination is, at least in part, illusory. That is, if we are unable to explain self-caused things and therefore have to conclude that all things are externally caused to some extent, then education is always and inevitably a matter of external influence.

The interesting question, then, is not whether someone's beliefs are authentic or self-caused but whether they are productive in the sense that they benefit that person's striving for self-preservation. If they are not, then we may have cause to speak of influence that is bad, but if they are, then it is a kind of influence that is good regardless if we label it indoctrination or not. Spinoza's tight connection between ethical values and rationality – in combination with his denial of the reality of moral knowledge – therefore greatly diminishes the hazards of indoctrination. The only firm foundation – applicable to all finite modes – is the striving to preserve oneself and to flourish in being. Beyond this, moral knowledge is constructed individually and can therefore not be handed down from teacher to student.

A more serious challenge, however, stems from Spinoza's narrow path to human freedom. It is clear from Spinoza's epistemological account that only



very few can ever hope to arrive at an adequate understanding of themselves and the world. Since freedom and understanding are intimately linked, this means that very few actually stand to gain the kind of freedom of the mind that an adequate understanding would result in. Spinoza famously closes the *Ethics* by noting this limitation, concluding that “all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare” (5p42s). All is not lost, however. Since both understanding and freedom (like existence itself) are gradual notions for Spinoza, this does not mean that the great majority will be left to their own devices, deprived of any real chance of escaping the bondage of the passive affects. Instead, it means that everyone will strive according to his or her own capacity, achieving a degree of freedom that will correspond to his or her degree of understanding.

### **Toward a Spinozistic understanding of education**

To conclude this book, it seems appropriate to supply a very brief account of what I perceive to be some of the defining traits of a Spinozistically conceived education. A Spinozistic education entails positing an education beyond praise and blame. Since Spinoza denies moral responsibility – in the sense that our supposed capacity to direct ourselves via our free will is deemed an illusion – a Spinozistic education is geared for understanding rather than changing the natural order of things. It follows from this that education serves to promote mental health insofar as a better understanding of the world is taken to lead to a satisfaction of the mind denied those who believe that they are somehow responsible for things they cannot cause. Mental health, in this context, is conceived in terms of human freedom, where freedom is not understood as freedom from constraints but rather the freedom to recognize necessary constraints and to live according to this understanding. The more students understand about themselves and the world, the more freedom of the mind they gain, and the more empowered they become in the sense that they are then the adequate cause of some of their actions. The end result of this is that they are able to make intelligent choices, grounded in an adequate understanding of themselves and the world in which they live.

An unexpected conclusion resulting from the fact that Spinoza’s notion of human freedom is equivalent with an increased understanding is that an educational account flowing from this ethical insight would share many characteristics with what may be labeled traditional schooling. This is true at least insofar as traditional schooling is understood to be promoting a more adequate scientific understanding of the natural world, where the teacher is expected (and entrusted) to introduce his or her students to this kind of understanding by way of lessons in subjects such as physics and biology. Since the purpose of an education informed by Spinoza’s ethics of self-preservation is to increase the degree of reality of the student, and since the degree of reality of the student corresponds with his or her degree of adequate ideas, it follows that education revolves around improving our understanding of the world so as to improve our understanding of ourselves. While the purpose of this is to attain the ethical



goals of self-empowerment and self-determination, the only way to achieve this is to improve one's degree of understanding. Even though, as we have seen in Chapter Four, this understanding is always conditioned by our embodied experiences, this does not mean that education is about experimenting with our bodies. What it means is that if we can come to see how our embodied perspectives limit our perception of the world (by virtue of understanding natural causation), we can compensate for this limitation so as to – via reason – become less determined by the things around us and more determined by ourselves. Accordingly, to become more self-determined is the purpose of increasing our understanding, and so it follows that it is also the purpose of education.

## Notes

- 1 Cf. Kant (1999), A532–58/B560–86.
- 2 Allen W. Woods offers the following helpful explanation of transcendental freedom: “When we think of ourselves as appearances, we are determined, but when we think of ourselves as moral agents, we transport ourselves into the intelligible world, where we are transcendently free” (2008: 135).
- 3 In this sense I depart somewhat from Biesta, who sometimes tends to conflate wants and needs insofar as he has reservations about the teacher being “the provider, that is, the one who is there to meet the needs of the learner” (2005: 58). I would want to stress that if we understand needs the way I have argued – in terms of adequately understood needs – there really is no problem in understanding the teacher as the one who meets the needs of the students (and him or herself). If, however, we understand needs in terms of wants – that is, as poorly understood needs – then this poses a serious problem for education. In this sense, I would argue that it is wants rather than needs that is placed at the center of the consumer model of education.

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